The Fancy Dress Party

Alberto Moravia

Penguin Book 2371
The Fancy Dress Party

Alberto Moravia was born in Rome in 1907, the son of an architect. Between the ages of nine and twenty he suffered from continual ill health. He learned French, German and English as a child, and in 1925, at the time of writing his first novel, was foreign correspondent in London, Paris and elsewhere for *La Stampa* and *La Gazzetta del popolo* of Turin. In the later years of Fascism his books were banned and he had to write articles under a pseudonym. During the German occupation of Italy he went into hiding in the mountains until the liberation in May 1944. He lives in Rome and on the island of Capri and is regarded as among the foremost of Italian writers. His latest novel to be published in England is *The Lie* (1966).

The following books by Alberto Moravia are available in Penguins: *Bitter Honeymoon, Conjugal Love, The Empty Canvas, A Ghost at Noon, Roman Tales, Two Adolescents, Two Women, The Wayward Wife, The Woman of Rome, The Fetish,* and *The Conformist.*

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia

La Mascherata first published in Italy 1947

This translation first published by Secker & Warburg 1954
Published in Penguin Books 1968

Copyright © Alberto Moravia 1947

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, London, Reading and Fakenham
Set in Monotype Baskerville

This book is sold subject to the condition that
it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser

I

The fortunes of a certain country on the other side of the ocean, whose population had been decimated, ruined, and exhausted by almost ten years of violent civil war, were finally entrusted to the guiding hand of General Tereso Arango.

Tereso, a cautious man as well as a brave one, was the survivor and conqueror of half a dozen generals who, at the head of their various armies, had competed for power during those ten long years of internal strife. His tastes were simple, soldierly, not to say crude. The brilliant society of his capital could scarcely claim to have come into contact with him at all except on occasions of patriotic celebration or military review. Not for Tereso were the *salons* and receptions of the aristocracy; he preferred an intimate dinner with his old companions-in-arms, a cock-fight, a bull-fight, a popular theatre – or even some good history book, or the facile music of a small orchestra of guitars.

In this simplicity and waywardness may be found the explanation why Tereso, for many years, had firmly declined the invitations of the Duchess Gorina, who was by far the most illustrious, the richest, the most hospitable lady of title in the whole country. But the Duchess had sworn to herself that she would overcome Tereso's misanthropy; and so, seeing that fawning and flattery had no effect, she determined to find out the General's vulnerable point. With all his valour Tereso, she argued, was but a man, and therefore must surely have one. The Duchess, under an appearance of the proudest, stiffest reserve, concealed a slyness of character that was good-natured as well as penetrating. It did not take her long to discover that Tereso, so courageous in war, could be disarmed by a single look from a woman who attracted him; and that, in particular, he was at this moment

enamoured of a certain Fausta Sanchez, a very young widow and one of the loveliest ladies in high society. The Duchess invited Fausta to her house and shut herself up for a couple of hours with her in her own private sitting-room. The result of this conversation was that a few days later, at a diplomatic reception, Tereso found himself once again invited to the Duchess's house.

Tereso hated the Duchess, whom he regarded as the incarnation of all the pride, ignorance, corruption, and vanity of the country's ancient nobility. And so he gave his customary reply: that he was sorry, but affairs of State absolutely prevented him from taking part in entertainments of the kind she suggested. The Duchess, stiff and unmoved, remarked casually that his refusal would certainly be a great disappointment to the Countess Sanchez, who had much hoped to see him at the party.

At the mention of this name, Tereso, who for months had been in vain pursuit of Fausta, felt his heart begin to pound, notwithstanding his age and experience, in an altogether youthful fashion. 'Who told you,' he asked imprudently, 'that my presence would please her?'

'Who would *not* be pleased at Your Excellency's presence?' replied the Duchess, with an air not so much of flattering him as of teaching him a lesson.

Tereso bit his lip and retorted drily that, if Fausta was so desirous of seeing him, she had only to come to the Palace during audience hours and she would be immediately received. The Duchess replied that, though it was true that Fausta had lost her husband, she still had a brother; and how could Tereso imagine that this brother would allow his sister to cross a threshold that had already proved fatal to the reputations of so many women? Tereso's success with women, she said, was too well known for Fausta's brother to take such a risk. 'I understand,' thought Tereso; 'Fausta's price, in the first place, is my presence at the party.' So he told the Duchess that he accepted her invitation, and would come to the ball. It so happened, he added ingenuously, that he had to go to Antigua (a small town not far from the villa where the Duchess's party was to be given) and would

take the opportunity to run out and visit her. In saying this he thought to deceive the Duchess as to the real motives which led him to accept her invitation. But the Duchess meanwhile was saying to herself that, at last, the fish was hooked.

Actually Fausta, with her brother's agreement, had already made up her mind to become Tereso's mistress. She knew, however, that men – especially men in positions of power – reckon the value of things they ardently desire in exact accordance with the difficulty they experience in obtaining them. To consent to a meeting with Tereso at the Palace, or in some hunting-lodge or other, would mean cheapening their relationship from the very beginning, and making it extremely brief and exactly like all the other relationships that had preceded it. Fausta had been quite ready to take counsel with the Duchess; and the latter had advised her to wait until the party which, at the same season each year, she gave at her country villa. During the course of the party, and after a great deal of fuss, Fausta would give Tereso to understand that she was not entirely indifferent to him. After that the two women would play their cards in such a way as to keep Tereso perpetually in suspense and perpetually unsatisfied; and so would get as much out of him as they possibly could.

The party was thus becoming a network of self-interest. The Duchess, in persuading the General to come to her house, was at last satisfying her long-standing and hitherto unfulfilled ambition as a hostess. Fausta would be enabled to cast her net. Her brother, Manuele, hoped to obtain from the General certain favours which so far had always been resolutely refused him. Tereso counted on achieving, at last, the conquest of Fausta. And at the last moment there was added to all these intrigues yet another one, more complicated than any of them, on the part of the Chief of Police, Osvaldo Cinco.

*

The Chief of Police was a small, hunch-backed man, with a hunchback's characteristically large, sickly-sweet face, and

was celebrated throughout the land for his stud of pedigree bulls and for his cream-coloured silk shirt-cuffs which stuck out, dingy and crumpled, several inches over his long hairy hands, and which he struggled continually, but in vain, to push back. For some years he had been observing with consternation that his influence with Tereso was visibly diminishing. He had been very useful to Tereso in the first period of his rule, when it had been necessary, for the peace of the country, to alternate mildness with stronger measures. But with the years Tereso's popularity had become firmly established; and the General had had less and less recourse to Cinco's methods, which were, to tell the truth, of a rather shady kind. Quietly, and one by one, Tereso had replaced all the former delegates of his authority. His government was tending to become more and more benignant and fatherly; as times changed the old, violent companions of his early struggles were no longer needed. He had not yet got rid of the Chief of Police, merely because he realized that all hatred for his government – if indeed there was any left – fell upon the head of Cinco, while he himself remained immune. Now, however, Tereso, beloved by all, no longer required even this kind of lightning conductor. He was thinking of replacing Cinco by some new man, some ordinary bureaucrat, a reliable underling with an unsullied record and clean hands. This intention on the part of Tereso showed itself in an ever-increasing coldness towards Cinco. And Cinco, who regarded the control of the national police as his own personal life-work and foresaw that he would soon be compelled to hand it over to one of his subalterns, was miserable.

He realized that the main causes of his impending removal from the post of Chief of Police were the tranquillity of the country and the unparalleled popularity which Tereso now enjoyed. He discovered that Tereso was going to the Duchess's party; and he suddenly had the idea that if, during the party, he could succeed in staging a faked attempt on the General's life the latter would be frightened and would postpone his dismissal. Cinco did not fail to see that it was a dangerous game and that by it he might lose not

only his job but his life. But he was a gambler, and he knew that the most hazardous throw is often the most successful. He obtained audience of Tereso and, without fuss or preamble, told him plainly that it had come to his knowledge that an attempt on his life had been planned to take place during the Duchess's party.

'This is a very serious matter,' concluded Cinco. 'We are up against people who are desperate and ready for anything. I advise Your Excellency to make an excuse and not go to the party. . . . It is true that in that way we should not be able to lay hands on the conspirators – but at any rate all danger would be avoided.'

These words were designed to provoke Tereso's courage and vanity and to make him decide, without more ado, upon a course of action exactly contrary to that which the cunning Chief of Police recommended. Fausta and a love intrigue were mixed up in this affair; and Tereso, entirely indifferent to danger, was afraid that his plan of seduction might be frustrated.

'You tell me you have the names of all the conspirators,' he said sharply. 'Well – arrest them . . . and don't let me hear any more about it.'

'But how can I do that, Excellency?' said the other, pushing back over his wrists the silk cuffs which, even at that early hour, were all crumpled. 'We must have proof – even a minimum of proof. Otherwise we shall find ourselves arresting, not conspirators, but peaceful citizens.'

This conversation took place in the 'Hall of Battles', so called because Tereso had had pictures of the most important of the combats in which he had taken part painted on the walls. Tereso rose from his desk and began to walk up and down the great room.

'This is the result of your much-vaunted system,' he grumbled. 'An attempt on my life. . . . Just because for once I come out of my lair they make plans to kill me. It's all your fault and the fault of your cursed police, who don't know their job. But I'll get rid of you. I'll smash you. . . . I'll be done with the whole pack of you.'

Cinco, not in the least frightened, smiled. He knew by

experience that these outbursts meant nothing at all. It was in fact Tereso's habit to cover up moments of doubt and reflection by means of such tantrums; and when conscious of insecurity he would exaggerate his air of self-assurance and aggressiveness. At this moment Tereso was thinking of Fausta and wondering what he should do. Cinco, he admitted, was right: the conspirators must be caught in the act. On the other hand, there was the danger that his own little adventure might, in all the confusion of the discovery and the arrests, be completely thwarted. Women were so fickle; their ideas and feelings were so easily affected. Tereso, clearly, was labouring under several illusions as regards Fausta, and he did not realize that her feelings would certainly not be changed in any way by the discovery of the plot. At last he inquired sharply whether Cinco felt certain of being able to carry out his operation without in any way disturbing the party. Cinco readily guaranteed that he could do this and that no one would notice anything. After one or two more outbursts of ill-humour, Tereso began to think that, if things really went as Cinco promised – and, in view of Cinco's proved ability, there was no reason to doubt it – the plot, instead of spoiling his adventure, might give it a certain piquancy. Women, reflected Tereso, love brave men. To Fausta he would appear, not merely as the head of the Government, but also as a man whose life had been in danger and who, notwithstanding this danger, had had the courage to think only of love. It must be observed at this point that Tereso really was a brave man; and that nine out of ten men in his situation would have listened to Cinco's hypocritical advice and given up both the party and the adventure. But Tereso happened to be in that special state of mind, at the same time passionate and melancholy, which afflicts old men who are in love; to them death itself, far from being an impediment to their passion, seems almost, on the contrary, to be a stimulus to it. He was reflecting that even if the plot were successful he could not come to a nobler end – at the height of his glory and power, weltering in his own blood in the arms of the woman he loved. Tereso felt in his heart the passion of greatness; and this passion,

which had raised him from the lowest rank to the heights of supreme power, gave him an immeasurable superiority over his ministers and the whole of his *entourage*.

It was decided, therefore, that Tereso should go to the party as he had intended, and that Cinco, on that same occasion, should exercise all his virtuosity as a policeman, making a clean sweep both of plot and plotters without anything being noticed. Tereso, reassured, dismissed Cinco. The latter went off to prepare his *coup de main*; for only a few days now remained before the party.

2

Amongst his many collaborators there was one whom Cinco trusted absolutely – a man called Perro, who was at once the subtlest and the strangest character of all his numerous *agents provocateurs*. Perro, in reality, had less of the spy in his composition than of the kind of actor who, as occasion demands, can turn himself into a perfect incarnation of many quite dissimilar roles. Above the normal height, with a strong, well-proportioned figure, he had a face like a mask of coloured wax, a mask with an absolute regularity of feature, without the slightest defect. His high, narrow forehead, his well-shaped eyes, wide open and with an ironical fixed gaze like the eyes of certain archaic statues that have stones for pupils, his long, sagacious nose, his wide mouth that turned up at the corners, always smiling and ceremonious beneath a neat moustache – all these were reminiscent of the face of some actor who, even off the stage, retains an unreal, fixed, dazed look, as though its owner were possessed with a spirit. Perro wore on his face the expression of easy, alert detachment of the man who is acting a part, the dazzled look of an actor at the front of the stage who sees nothing but a black chasm beyond the row of lights that illuminate him. It was as a result of this unrecognized theatrical vocation that Perro took to playing the spy. Another man in his place would have tried, with no less success, to

charm the stalls. Actors also love applause; Perro, on the contrary, had a passion for mystery, concealment, secrecy. Apart from his taste for disguise, he had an innate love of intrigue, deceit and stratagem. With his ability to make men speak from the depths of their most secret and dangerous passions, he felt himself to be more truly powerful than Tereso, who made them march in column of fours, rifle on shoulder. Perro was conscious of exercising a creative power over those whom he deceived; he was the showman of a complicated farce acted by puppets. To him the consequences of his ceaseless treachery, whether the prison-cell or the firing-squad, were not of great importance. He felt justified by his sense of duty; yet even without this justification he would have acted in the same way. He was, however, ambitious, and aspired to occupy, some day, the position now filled by Cinco. He considered that, given certain circumstances, it was not the ministers but the police who ruled. He aspired to the post of Chief of Police so that he might become a sort of indispensable Grey Eminence to a Tereso grown old and tired, so that he might transform the whole country into a theatre of intrigue, the scene of a positive orgy of duplicity. It was only this ambition which prevented him from playing a double game with Cinco, too, by acting as his spy and at the same time giving his services to some secret political organization. But in any case political parties, whether secret or not, had for some time now entirely vanished from the country.

Cinco therefore summoned Perro and explained what he wanted. What was required was to unearth some deluded idiot, some madman or simpleton, and force him to make the attempt, providing him with all that was necessary in the way of arms and accomplices, of place and opportunity. Discovered in the nick of time, the plot would procure honours, promotion and rewards for Cinco himself and for all the others who took part in it – except, of course, for the one man who really believed in it. Cinco did not tell Perro of his own reasons for this piece of trickery – not from shame, but because he knew there was no need of it, since Perro, from the first word, at once understood what it was

all about. Having listened to Cinco's exposition, Perro said that he could lay his hand on exactly the right man – a kind of madman, in fact, whom he had been, so to speak, keeping warm for several years for just this kind of affair. Let Cinco, he said, leave it to him, and everything would go perfectly. Cinco asked him to explain his idea. Perro, calmly and complacently, at once expounded his plan of action with the precision of an instructor dismantling a machine piece by piece in order to demonstrate it to his pupils. Cinco, who loved this mathematical lucidity of Perro's, was entirely convinced. Without any further instructions he dismissed him, making an appointment to meet him in three days' time at the Duchess's party.

So Perro left for Antigua. For a day and a night, dressed as an unemployed manservant, with black trousers, a light jacket, and a stiff shirt, he sat in a third-class carriage, behaving all the time in a ceremonious, obliging, gentlemanly manner suitable to the part he was playing. His travelling companions, peasants and working people for the most part, were fully convinced, after much conversation and explanation, that they were talking to a nice young footman who was going into the service of the famous Duchess Gorina. Perro, acting the simpleton, went so far as to ask for a description of the Duchess's villa from one of them who had worked there as a gardener.

'From what I understand,' said Perro when the man had completed his catalogue of the splendours of the Duchess's estate, 'it's just the place for me. I've always wanted to get a job in one of these grand houses. There's less work and you make more money.'

'And besides,' observed another man, a prosperous farmer, 'we all know that you fellows don't waste your time in places of that sort . . . you get a little bit here, and a little bit there,' and winking one eye in his broad, fat face, he made a gesture as of someone stealing things.

Perro, offended, protested that he was an honest man; if they did not believe him he could show them references from half a dozen places where he had been employed, amongst them one from the Countess of Villahermosa, who had been

particularly pleased with him. A discussion followed, in which other passengers took part; and the farmer had finally to admit, in the face of Perro's lively indignation, that he had spoken in general, without reference to present company. Perro might easily have spared himself this complication of hypocrisy, just as there was no real necessity for him to travel third class. But he did not care to do things by halves; besides, it pleased him to mix with working-class people in order to gauge their humours and opinions.

He arrived at Antigua towards sunset; and after helping an old peasant woman to lift down her bundles and baskets, he crammed a cyclist's cap of rough cloth on to his head, grasped his ugly fibre suitcase and walked out of the station. Antigua, once a wealthy and populous town on account of its neighbouring silver mines, is now no longer of any importance. But from its past there survive about a hundred churches and smaller chapels, scattered throughout the maze of its narrow streets among hovels and baroque palaces. Coming out of the station, Perro boarded a small dilapidated tram full of workmen and peasants and went on it as far as the main square. He knew that in this square – a large rectangle surrounded with gigantic plane trees – were to be found all the new, pretentious public buildings of the town: the Governor's palace, the municipal offices, the bank, the principal hotel, the two cafés where politics were discussed; outside the square there was nothing but narrow streets, darkness, empty churches, hovels, and squalor. Negligently carrying his big suitcase, he started to stroll round the square; and it did not take him long to find out, from listening here and there to the groups of people walking under the plane-trees or sitting on the benches, that the sole subject of conversation in the square, and therefore in the town, was the forthcoming visit of Tereso and the Duchess's party. But, while preparations for the General's arrival were limited to the usual proclamations stuck on the walls, the usual illuminations, the usual triumphal arches of flowers, the Duchess seemed to have turned the whole place upside down. From what Perro gathered, she had reserved the whole of the two largest hotels in Antigua so as to place

their old-fashioned, smelly, provincial rooms at the disposal of her too numerous guests. For days past tailors had been working for her on fancy dresses, provision dealers had been busy collecting the vast amount of supplies she required, nursery gardeners and building contractors had been making preparations for the illumination of the park and the decorations. Tereso, in comparison, gave them far less trouble and the purely military design of the ceremony of welcome that the town was preparing for him had not even the charm of novelty.

In the square itself, parked all round the equestrian monument of Simon Bolivar, Perro saw at least twenty enormous, luxurious motor-cars. Idlers and street urchins were loitering around them, commenting on the strange shapes of their bonnets and the richness of their shining metal bodies. Then, pursuing his researches, he went on to the two cafés; and here, too, while he casually sipped a foul drink made of synthetic alcohol, the only subject of conversation he heard was the Duchess Gorina's party. People were talking of not merely hundreds, but thousands, of guests, of fancy dresses and of orchestras, of cooks and of food. But he noticed that their remarks were more admiring than ill-natured – a sure sign, he said to himself, that there was not too great a degree of poverty amongst the populace and that this extraordinary outburst of extravagance was not therefore resented as an act of defiance. After resting for a little on a seat occupied by three or four old men who were discussing the probable prices of the Duchess's guests' motor-cars, he went into each of the two hotels to ascertain from porters beaming with satisfaction that all the rooms were taken; he then went off towards the lower part of the square, where a street less winding and narrow than the others led out of it – the Alameda Dos de Mayo. Near the beginning of this street was a smart confectioner's shop at which he wanted also to take a look; it was the only one in the town, and its windows were overflowing with pastries and sweets. Flattening his nose against the glass, he could see that the shop was full of odd people, dressed in clothes that were, at any rate in those parts, unusual – the men in short, full breeches and

leather jackets, with coloured scarves round their necks, yellow cow-hide riding-boots, and wide-brimmed hats; the women in leather trousers, checked shirts, high boots, and big felt hats. These were so-called 'ranchers'' costumes – though there was nothing in the whole province in the way of a ranch; and in this small ecclesiastical town, in this very urban confectioner's shop, they looked more like an anticipation of the Duchess's fancy dress ball than like people in everyday clothes. The Duchess's guests (for it was indeed they) filled the little tables inside the shop and sat in a tight row round the zinc bar, raising their glasses and jokingly imitating the uncouth, exaggerated gestures of cowboys. It was like peeping into an opera house during a dress rehearsal.

After gazing attentively at this curious scene, Perro went on down the Alameda. He went down its whole length, pausing every now and then in front of shop windows, till he came out into a deserted, grass-grown square over which a church dedicated to the Madonna de Los Remedios raised its dark and crumbling façade. He immediately noticed – though twilight had already fallen – a figure dressed in a faded suit of a colour somewhere between lilac and brown, with a very light, almost milk-white, hat on its head, black pointed shoes whose shape was distorted by large bunions on the feet inside them, and an umbrella, notwithstanding the fine weather, hooked over its arm. Perro went straight to this man and put a hand on his shoulder. The other turned towards him a brown, sharp-featured face with a long, pointed, shiny nose.

'Inspector!' said Perro fiercely, 'what on earth are you doing here in this square, with that umbrella, in this fine weather? Is it to protect you from the swallows?'

'Excuse me,' said the detective, 'but when I came out I thought it was going to rain.'

'Also,' continued Perro, 'do you allow yourself to be held up like that by anybody who shouts "Inspector!" at you? What if I had been trying it on?'

'I had already recognized you,' said the other with an awkward laugh.

Perro administered a few more reprimands, asked the man whether he had noticed anything unusual and, when informed that the town was as quiet as it could possibly be, left him to his duty.

3

With the assurance of one who knew the place well, Perro turned out of the square to the left through a network of winding lanes. Night had by now fallen, and in these narrow streets only an occasional lamp-post illuminated faintly the huge solemn gates of palaces and the little doors of hovels, the flights of steps, the alleys, the iron bars over windows, the cross-roads. Every now and then some irregular square opened out round the high, dark façade of a church. Relying on the darkness to reach his destination unobserved, Perro finally entered the hall of a large, handsome building. After ascending two flights of a dignified but dirty staircase, he went through some swing-doors lined with green baize and came to a series of small rooms used as offices. He went straight to a room at the end of a corridor, where a light shone through glass doors, and entered it unhesitatingly and without knocking, finding himself immediately in front of a desk in an office filled with shelves and files. A newspaper was spread out on the desk, and above the open sheets glistened the bald rotundity of a bent head. At the sound of the door closing the head raised itself, showing the bespectacled face, spotted with large, pale warts, of the local police Commissioner. The moment he saw Perro he rose to greet him, as though reluctantly, and with an expression of obvious irritation.

Perro carefully closed the door, put down his suitcase in a corner and, seating himself without ceremony in front of the Commissioner, started asking him a series of questions in a sharp, peremptory voice. It was quite clear that the Commissioner did not care for Perro's tone. He was an old-fashioned sort of man who liked his comforts and was faithful

to police methods which Perro considered antiquated; and Perro, of whom he had heard much, seemed to him not merely an innovator but downright destructive. Another reason for his antipathy was that Perro, though so much younger, had already risen so high that he was in a position to order him about. Perro's career might be said to be just beginning, while he, after thirty years of service, saw himself approaching the time when he would be dismissed with a pension. Perro did not give him a moment's respite from questioning; and the Commissioner, chafing with rage, tried to hide his ill-humour behind clouds of smoke from a half-finished cigar which he gripped between his teeth as he answered slowly and unwillingly, sometimes even with an evasive sarcasm that he vainly imagined might pass unobserved. Perro, however, was immediately aware of this hostility, of this attitude which seemed to say: 'We got on so well here without you; what have you come for?' – and he decided at the first favourable opportunity to teach the man a lesson.

After informing himself exactly of the measures taken by the local police for the protection of Tereso on his arrival, Perro asked the Commissioner to show him the list of people who had been placed under precautionary arrest. The Commissioner, without getting up, stretched out a short arm among the files on the desk and, puffing smoke from his cigar, proffered a sheet of paper containing the list. Perro examined it eagerly, knowing that he would find in it the pretext he was looking for. He did in fact discover the name of a person who, in his opinion, should not have been arrested; and he immediately began to abuse the Commissioner unmercifully. At first his tone of voice remained level, though it was more intense than before; then, seeing that the Commissioner was unmoved and answered phlegmatically and with indifference, he suddenly raised his voice and started shouting that everything was going wrong, that everyone was asleep in this town, that it was high time to finish with these antiquated methods – and so on. This time the Commissioner turned pale, placed his cigar on the edge of the ash-tray and took off his glasses, showing two deep-set

eyes, black and dim like those of a blinded bird. But Perro, who wanted to see him really terrified, did not let him speak, and began to walk up and down the room, shouting that it was a disgrace, that he would send a report to Headquarters, that he would have him sacked and the whole of his staff with him. The Commissioner was now really frightened, as Perro had intended; and, rising from his seat as hurriedly as his stout body would permit, he started running up and down behind the enraged Perro, trying to justify himself and at the same time to admit that his tormentor was right – a difficult task because the two things were mutually exclusive. Finally, in desperation, not knowing what to do to calm Perro's transports of anger (by which he was quite taken in), he declared that he would go himself and give orders for the release of the individual in question; and he left the room.

The moment he had gone Perro, as though by enchantment, became perfectly calm and, sitting on the edge of the desk, began to read the newspaper. In a short time the Commissioner came in again, creeping forward now in a most respectful manner. The poor man did not dare sit down, but took care to assure Perro that the prisoner would be released at once.

'If I did wrong,' he said finally, easing his sweat-soaked collar with two fingers, 'it was because I was over-zealous.'

But Perro would not make any acknowledgement of this, though he craved it so humbly; he merely asked him, angrily, for the list of the Duchess's guests. With a servile haste very different from the unconcern with which, shortly before, he had handed him the list of arrests, the Commissioner ran to a bookshelf, pulled out some sheets of paper, and placed them right under the nose of Perro, who, in the meantime, had usurped his own chair behind the desk.

Standing beside him, the Commissioner pointed to the first line. 'If you like, we can go through it together,' he proposed.

But Perro replied rudely that he preferred to do his work without help and to be left alone. The Commissioner, afraid that he would pry into his papers and find the pretext for

another scene, then suggested that he might prefer to go to the reception-room, which was so much more spacious and clean, and where, also, he would be in no danger of being disturbed. But Perro, still in a rude tone, replied that the room suited him perfectly; the Commissioner could go himself, if he liked, to the reception-room. The latter, with a sigh, started towards the door, requesting, however, that Perro would call him whenever he needed him. Perro, already absorbed in the papers, pretended not to hear; but, just as the wretched man was going out on tiptoe, he called him back and told him to have a complete dinner sent up from some nearby restaurant. It pleased him to inflict this final humiliation on the Commissioner by treating him just as if he had been a waiter. The Commissioner hastily promised that the meal should be sent up at once.

Left alone, Perro worked for about two hours, comparing the list of the Duchess's guests with the list made by the Central Police, which had notes written beside each name, some long, some short, concerning the type, character, history and importance of the person in question. Perro, who was entirely devoted to his profession as a police spy, had no social ambitions or jealousies and was completely lacking in that vindictive, carping spirit which is particularly characteristic of people who, for some professional reason, are mixed up in the affairs of a class higher than their own. But, with all his impassiveness, he could not help raising his eyebrows when he saw the type of person that was to be found among the Duchess's guests. There was a sample of everything: secret vice, illicit passion, dishonesty, violence, crime, suppressed scandal, obscure abnormality, intrigue, treachery, corruptness, venality. These were the people dressed as cowboys, the sleek, well-fed men, the beautiful women, that he had seen through the window of the confectioner's shop; but here each was reduced to a mere brief summing-up, a mere name in a plain list of delinquents. There was no lack, it is true, of normal or simply insignificant people; they were indeed in the majority. But the vicious minority seemed to infect the rest, its moral defects being more conspicuous than the lack of character of the others and colouring the whole

mass with a sinister hue. So true is it that one rotten apple spoils a whole basketful. Except for that raising of the eyebrows, however, Perro skimmed quickly over the names; these people were too effete to be a serious nuisance. His interest was more particularly concentrated on certain people, of varying importance, who in the past had displayed some political activity or who had recently been in trouble. But it did not appear to him that even these could be called dangerous. Most of them were people who for one reason or another – either because they were compromised in some way or because of that last and final compromise, advancing age – were no longer in a position to do anything.

Perro worked without smoking, without even sipping the water that the Commissioner had placed in a carafe in front of him. Occasionally, coming upon a name that seemed familiar, he would raise his head and, gazing at the ceiling, search his memory for a face grown pale and dim. When he was half-way through his work the Commissioner entered, followed by a waiter carrying a tray of food. The Commissioner himself lifted the covers to show Perro the dishes; he hoped to be praised at any rate for his zeal as a flunkey. But Perro did not even raise his head from the papers, merely saying that he was all right, and would they put the tray on the desk? Working all the time, he slowly ate his dinner. Then, finishing simultaneously his meal and his business, he called the Commissioner and gave him back his files. The Commissioner was still hoping for one look, one word, if not of praise, at least of sympathy. But Perro, pulling down his cap on his head and taking up his suitcase, merely advised him not to make any more mistakes of the kind that he had been obliged to rectify.

'May I hope that His Excellency Cinco will know how I—?' began the Commissioner. But he paused, astonished, staring at the empty doorway. Perro had vanished.

4

So far Perro had struck but a few preliminary chords on that instrument of falsehood of which he was so consummate a master. But now, his footstep light, his mind filled with the joy of adventure, he prepared to embark upon his principal theme. Quite apart from his profession he derived a truly profound pleasure from deceiving his neighbour. He himself could not have explained the reasons for this quite genuine satisfaction. Perhaps it came from a delight in power, increased and multiplied by virtue of the deceit he practised; perhaps from a feeling that his duplicity gave him the advantage of being able to keep a watch, as though through the crack of a door, upon throbbing human lives unaware of his presence.

The intrigue upon which he was now embarking was of a type after his own heart. He took a particular delight in assuming a nobility of sentiment and manner. In such cases his hypocrisy acquired a refinement of cruelty, developing a style at once brilliant, lucid, and sharp as a razor. The counterpoint of word and deed was dominated by an urgent, regular rhythm that intoxicated him until his acting took on a positively lyrical quality. Apart from his own job Perro really believed in nothing but the most elementary material necessities. Everything else seemed to him mere froth and fog and wind. In contrast to those whom he called idealists he found himself in the detached, superior state of mind of a professor explaining to his pupils that lightning is not an expression of heavenly anger but simply electrical energy released by storms. Perro would have sold Jesus Christ, not for money nor from malice, but just to show Him that He was wrong to speak as He did.

When he came out of the police-station Perro walked straight on, carrying his suitcase and with his cap pulled down over his eyes, with all the appearance of an out-of-work footman. After making his way through several nar-

row streets he came out at last under the town walls. He followed the wall for some distance till he came to the gate he was making for, and then, passing through it, found himself in a great bare space interspersed with holes and scattered mounds of rubble – more like a piece of waste ground than a public square. This space was plunged in darkness, but at its further edge glittered the irregular lights of a shabby fair-ground. People were walking about in the open space in the dark; and beyond, round the lighted booths, could be seen little groups of idlers. Every now and then the noise of shots rang out from the shooting-galleries, and sounds of laughter and whistling could be heard. A flagstaff stood in the middle of the open space with some sort of flag hanging from it, which could be heard flapping heavily in the occasional gusts of wind.

Perro had an appointment in this open space – immediately under the flagstaff, in fact. But he knew the person he was looking for only too well and, noticing a scrimmage near one of the fair booths, went off in that direction, certain that he would find his man in the middle of it.

The booth in question was the shooting-gallery, a kind of box hung with red material, with two acetylene flares which gave a brilliant white light. Inside it a sad-looking, black-haired girl, dressed in mourning, stood beside a counter against a background of targets punctured with holes, and bottles of fizzy drinks. She was reloading the rifles, bending back their steel barrels as she did so with a thin white arm which looked too feeble for the job. She did it all without ever speaking a word. An underfed little urchin, with big bright eyes and a twisted, pinched mouth, handed her the cartridges.

The scrimmage, however, had been caused by four or five youths who wore trousers clipped at the ankles and cycling vests. They had formed a ring round a squat, misshapen individual and, with many jests, were bouncing him backwards and forwards between them like a ball. The man who was providing all this fun had a large head with curly hair like wool. He wore the very strong glasses of extreme short sight, and had a crooked, curving nose – like some kind of

fish – in the middle of a broad, pale face covered with freckles. His big, shapeless mouth, with its entire lack of expression, reminded one of the mouth of a deaf mute. He wore a black jacket with silk facings – like a notary – but his trousers were light-coloured and tightly stretched over an enormous behind which stuck out clumsily below the austere jacket and lifted its edge.

The boys were pushing and tossing him about, with gibes and jests which seemed to be lacking in novelty both for the man who was their butt and for the jesters themselves. It was evidently a time-honoured custom to surround and torment him in this way whenever he appeared. But, not unnaturally, the victim had never become accustomed to it. He was pulled about, pinched, shoved hither and thither; but he was never able to tell where the pinch or the squeeze or the push came from.

'Let me alone,' he begged, struggling to get away. 'Mind your own business. What harm have I done you? I was here and I didn't even look at you.' The final touch of monstrosity was that the voice which issued from his spluttering mouth was shrill, feminine and stammering.

'Go away, leave him alone,' suddenly exclaimed a fair-haired youth, whose cheeks were flushed with savage joy, and who seemed to be the chief of the band, 'let him alone. I'll take him under my own protection. . . .' As he said this he caught the big head under his arm with the neat, dexterous movement with which a man grips a wine-flask to pour it out, and meanwhile, with the other hand, making a pretence of protecting him, he pulled his hair.

But the 'protected' man was suffocating. 'Let me go,' he yelled.

The other at last released his hold, and his victim, scarlet in the face, rose to his feet panting. But the smallest of the group, a little thin boy with an enormous cyclist's cap pulled right down to his projecting ears, possibly encouraged by the hitherto passive attitude of the sufferer, took a leap and seized him by the hair, hoping, perhaps, to drag him to the ground. But the other, maddened with pain, completely lost his temper, and seizing the boy by the neck, squeezed with

all the strength of his large hands. The myopic, freckled face was merciless, and the boy's companions realized that unless they rescued him he might actually be strangled. All four of them threw themselves upon the tightly-clasped pair, and for a moment there was a struggling heap of bodies on the ground in front of the booth. Then, one after another, the youths got up, panting but satisfied; and finally their victim rose also. His starched collar was hanging loosely outside his black jacket which was all dirty and dusty. A trickle of blood came from one of his nostrils. He had lost his spectacles and was groping in the void.

'Blackguards!' he stammered. 'Murderers! You'll see if I don't get my revenge.'

To which the fair-haired youth, stepping in front of him and shaking his forefinger under his nose, replied threateningly: 'You meant to hurt him, didn't you? But remember, this was only a sample. . . . Next time we'll break your arms – both of them – d'you understand?'

Perro had looked on motionless at this scene. To tell the truth, he was not sorry to see Saverio (for that was the name of the boys' victim) treated in this way. He felt that if he had been forced to intervene he would have liked to take the part, not of the sufferer, but of his tormentors, and to give the former a good kick in those pale, inflated pants of his. But the moment came when he felt he must make his presence known. His tall, erect figure moved resolutely from the edge of the light cast by the acetylene flares of the shooting-gallery and forced its way right through the group. He put down his suitcase on the counter, took a rifle from the girl's hand, raised it to his shoulder and, with equal speed and precision, fired off a dozen shots, hitting the bull's eye every time. A cry of admiration arose from the group of boys. Saverio, in the meantime, had recognized him and, after making a very expressive grimace at him, finally found his glasses on the ground and limped away. Perro threw down a silver coin, waited for the girl to count out his change, and then with a 'Keep the rest,' which left his admirers open-mouthed, took up his suitcase and went off across the open space.

5

Perro had not been boasting when he had declared to the Chief of Police that he could lay his hand on just the man that was needed. He had known Saverio for a couple of years and had been able during all that time to 'keep him warm', as he himself expressed it, until he should be required – so that all he now had to do was to serve him up, without even putting him back on the fire, since he was cooked to a turn. To speak plainly, Perro, in the course of his professional reconnoitrings, had had the idea of creating a secret revolutionary party of the most violent type and of enrolling in it a number of discontented fanatics. By this ingenious method he served the double purpose of keeping a good many dangerous characters quiet and at the same time of placing a revolutionary party under the direct orders of the police. He had made Saverio, in common with all the others, believe that there existed in the capital a mysterious central committee from which he himself took orders as an inspector-general; and that this committee, in its turn, was in contact with another, much larger, international organization.

In this party of his Perro had enlisted only simple-minded, unrealistic people of the type of Saverio, for he knew that a professional agitator would not have found much difficulty in seeing through it. In this undertaking, besides amusing himself in his own way with his collection of simpletons and fools, Perro was also acting in obedience to an obscure apprehension that slumbered in the depth of his police-spy consciousness. Who knew whether, some day or other, a revolution might not really break out in the country? There had already been so many of them. On that day he, Perro, would throw aside his policeman's cloak and save his own skin by displaying his activity as a conspirator. Cinco was not ignorant of his acolyte's prowess in this matter; but, apart from his Chief, Perro had not confided the existence

of his party to anyone. This was also because he felt that the party was a creation exclusively his own: if others meddled with it, its whole charm and inspiration would vanish.

Perro caught up with Saverio beyond the open space, on the main road. It was a night of full moon; trees bending out over the hedges cast here and there dark, broken, motionless shadows across the road, which was white in the cold light. Saverio, hobbling along clumsily at Perro's side, suddenly took hold of his arm and, in a low voice, started abusing the youths at the shooting-gallery. Every now and then as he spoke he would be caught up by his stammer, and then he would stop and gaze fixedly at Perro for a moment through his thick glasses while he struggled with the rebellious syllables. Finally the word would come bursting out violently, as though he were spitting it forth. He said that, as soon as certain things came to pass of which Perro knew, he would take his revenge upon them, as upon all the other people in the town who mocked at him.

'What will you do to them?' asked Perro, amused at this extraordinary mixture of clumsiness and rage.

Saverio, stuttering wildly over his words, answered that he would have them all shot as counter-revolutionaries, for that was what they were: they were the people who formed the idle, pleasure-loving mass upon which reactionary governments are usually founded; people far more dangerous than the *bourgeois* themselves, since the latter at least minded their own business, whereas these people corrupted the healthy, revolutionary populace amongst whom they lived. Perro said that in that case he would have to shoot half the population of the country, for, in fact, half the population thought of nothing but bull-fights and cock-fights, of *pelota* and women, of singing and dancing. Saverio replied that, if it proved necessary, he would do so. Revolutions were forged in blood. Perro slyly inquired whether he did not think that, when they saw him slaughtering his personal enemies, his rivals would not accuse him of using the revolution to pay off his own private grudges. Saverio was much struck by this observation, for he was always very careful not to let

himself be surprised in any position that was in the least unorthodox.

'Yes, but,' he objected, with a knowing solemnity, 'would it not perhaps be an equally great tactical error to spare counter-revolutionary elements like these?'

Perro replied that there is nothing worse than to give the impression of mixing private with public life. Saverio, uncertain, was silent. Perro chuckled. This was the Saverio that he loved.

They walked at a good pace; and Saverio, his anger having now evaporated, began to ask Perro a number of questions about the activities of the Party. Stammering all the time and avoiding such freedom of expression as he considered dangerous, he made certain criticisms which he had been meditating for a long time. He said he certainly did not wish to give the Committee the impression that he was insubordinate; in fact, as far as that went, they ought to know that nowhere in the whole country could they count upon any initiate more obedient or more zealous than himself. And yet, if he might be permitted, he would like to make one or two remarks – quite confidentially, of course – to Perro, whom he now thought of not merely as a superior, but as a friend. Besides, had it not been expressly recommended by the Committee that any member of the Party should make such criticisms as he thought most opportune – always, of course, within the limits of strict orthodoxy? Perro admitted the truth of Saverio's remark. The latter, encouraged, began by saying that the various members of the Party were too much left to themselves. Apart from Perro's own rare visits, he himself had had no contact, either direct or indirect, with the Committee during these two first years of his militant membership. There was a risk, he added, obviously alluding to his own case, of their finding that their most valuable instruments had become rusty with idleness or uncertainty. For instance, there was much, very much, to be done amongst the workers and peasants in this particularly poor and oppressed province. All these people were waiting impatiently for a new call to faith and action. Why did the Party not allow a carefully prepared underground

agitation? And, on the other hand, why did the Party keep him so short of its own publications? Apart from a small handbook (printed under the auspices of the police, thought Perro, who could not help smiling), apart from one or two insignificant leaflets, he had never received anything. Perhaps they had forgotten all about him far away in this remote place? Did the gentlemen of the Committee realize that in a revolution the rural masses are sometimes more valuable than the town masses? Perhaps they did not know that seventy per cent of the best propagandists are usually recruited from amongst casual labourers, that is, from amongst people who, thanks to their wandering life, are in a better position than anyone to develop a widespread, ramifying activity? Again, why was he not permitted to do the same thing with other people here as Perro had done with him? He was a 'cell'; so far, so good; but what about other cells?

To this Perro, who was highly amused, replied vaguely that other cells existed – perhaps more of them than he imagined – but that it was not his business to worry about them. Saverio seemed slightly comforted by this answer, which appeared to him quite in accordance with revolutionary practice. But he insisted that it was a mistake to leave him with nothing to do, so completely idle and inactive. Perro replied gravely that the Committee would soon be making use of him. But he must first arm himself with a thorough study of theory, and for this purpose, it seemed to Perro, he had plenty of books. This time Saverio admitted that he had derived very great profit from his latest reading and in particular from the book called *The Civilization of the Future*, by the celebrated Francisco Segoviano – a splendid work, a work of purest gold, overwhelming in its dialectic, perfect in its practical logic, a work as valuable as a battle won, a work which by itself had done more to further the cause of the proletariat than the whole of the social literature of the last twenty years. Perro approved this enthusiasm, but he advised him to be on his guard against certain Utopian complacencies in Segoviano, whose greatest weakness, he must not forget, lay precisely in that dialectic which

he so much admired, for he lacked the empiricism without which true revolutionary action was not possible. Saverio answered that that was true; and he did, in fact, vary his reading of Segoviano with the perusal of the manual on revolutionary tactics by the no less incomparable Henrique, which was also an extremely good and valuable book and which seemed exactly suited to fill the gaps and repair the omissions of Segoviano. Segoviano, in short, might be termed the brain, Henrique the arm of the revolution.

But Saverio, even in the midst of all this enthusiasm, did not forget his own personal position; and he again began asking Perro to put his case before the Committee. He prudently added, however, that he would not wish his observations, in the exact terms in which he had made them, to become known in the highest circles of the Party. They were only confidential criticisms, and he hoped that they would go no further. The Committee, on the other hand, should know that he was always at its service, now as ever, and ready for anything. Perro, with some solemnity, praised his fine discipline and told him that soon, very soon, much sooner then he expected, the Committee would be making use of him.

'Really?' stammered the other, considerably cheered, 'really?'

'Yes,' answered Perro.

Saverio then declared that he also had certain plans to propose to Perro. But Perro reduced him to silence by saying that it was not his business to make plans, but merely to carry out blindly the plans of the Party. He must be careful not to fall into the very grave error of an excessively *bourgeois* individualism. His criticisms had already been a bad sign, and they had not always been kept within the bounds of official orthodoxy. Saverio was so frightened by this warning that he at once held his tongue. They continued on their way in silence.

6

At a turn in the road, between two tall, leafy trees, a winding, stony lane became palely visible against the darkness of the earth. 'This way,' stammered Saverio. But at the same moment a tall, slim figure, whose face could not be distinguished in the shadow of the trees, almost ran into him.

'What are you doing, Saverio?' asked a clear voice. 'Hunting glow-worms?'

'I – I – I was going for a walk,' answered Saverio.

'Be careful you don't let Ludra out; shut the gate properly,' said the voice again, and then a soft whistling and a sound of footsteps becoming gradually fainter showed that the person was getting further away.

'Who was that?' asked Perro.

'Se – Se – Se — ' Saverio began, stammering; then, circumventing the difficulty, he exploded: 'My half-brother Sebastiano.'

'Ah, Sebastiano,' repeated Perro indifferently, turning round to look. Perro knew of the existence of this half-brother, but he had only seen him a couple of times and then from a distance. He knew that Saverio was the irregular offspring of a rich landowner called Rivas and a peasant girl of the humblest type. When Rivas died, Saverio was left in an anomalous position, somewhere between that of servant and relation. He and his half-brother lived their own lives, in the same villa, but sometimes not seeing each other for weeks at a time. Saverio lived in a kind of outhouse; Sebastiano had a small room in the villa, the only room which had remained furnished. For Rivas, a man of extremely dissolute life, had left Sebastiano nothing but the villa – and that was mortgaged. Everything else – land, motor-cars, horses, dogs, even the furniture of the house – had been gradually sold off to pay his debts. Perro had often reproved Saverio for feeling an affection unworthy of a revolutionary for this half-brother who was a gentleman and

a landed proprietor – to which jocular accusations Saverio, who took them quite seriously, had replied that his father, by ruining him in this way, had made Sebastiano into a proletarian like himself. In any case, he had added, he was entirely lacking in class consciousness.

They had now arrived at the villa. Behind the white bars of the gate could be seen the graceful dark shadow of a dog jumping nimbly up and down and wagging its tail, at every leap making a new pattern against the wrought-iron grille. This was Ludra, and Saverio, entering first, quickly grasped her by the collar for fear she should run after her master. A short avenue between two rows of aloes led to the house, which was white, rectangular and plain, with three rows of green-painted windows. Against one side of it could be seen a low building, the outhouse where Saverio lived. The latter led his guest towards it, observing that it was the best place for a talk. In the town, he said, they might have been overheard. And he added that for some time now he had felt himself to be continually spied upon, although, to tell the truth, he was unable to tell precisely how and by whom. His remark made Perro smile.

The outhouse had one window and a small door. When they had entered Perro found himself in a very large room with perfectly bare white-washed walls. There was no furniture except a couple of chairs, a rough bed all tousled and unmade, with the sheets trailing on the floor, and a small table upon which, amongst a confusion of papers, was a typewriter of an old-fashioned pattern. Otherwise the room was encumbered on all sides with books. There were rows of them on the floor against the walls, they were piled in the corners and heaped on the chairs. Underneath the couch were more books, and also on the table and on a cast-iron stove which stood in one corner of the room. One glance from Perro's expert eye was enough to show him the nature of these books – refuse from the warehouses of old anarchist and Socialist publishers, discarded rubbish from libraries of 'popular culture', floods of propaganda leaflets, masses of publicity material on political and social questions; books badly bound and worse printed, with squalid, provincial-

looking jackets whose 'clandestine' origin could be smelt a mile off, or with symbolic designs on them in the fashion of thirty years before. It formed a library which was valuable, in its own way, for its completeness, and Perro could not help thinking how many handcarts, attics and out-of-the-way corners Saverio must have searched in order to amass this collection of a class of literature now immensely rare and almost all of it forbidden.

'What a lot of books!' he could not help exclaiming as his astonished glance swept the room.

Saverio, with affected indifference, replied that, without wishing to boast, he could certainly claim to be the owner of an extremely rich library on the subjects that interested him. Then, carried away with the enthusiasm of the true collector, he added that he even possessed a copy of such-and-such a book which it was quite impossible to find, of such-and-such a publication that was now extremely rare. And, pulling them out from their hiding place under the bed, he showed Perro two or three anti-Tereso pamphlets which had been suppressed with particular severity. On the cover of one of them was portrayed the gigantic figure of a workman breaking his chains, while a tiny Tereso, dressed as a lion-tamer, recoiled in terror, letting his whip fall from his hand.

'If they knew I had these,' concluded Saverio awkwardly, 'who knows what they would do to me? But luckily everyone in this part of the country takes me for a sort of idiot.'

'And so you are,' thought the pitiless Perro. He sat down on a low stool and, putting down his suitcase beside him, took off his cap and stroked his thick, shining black hair. Then he started to speak in a cold, serious voice to Saverio, who for lack of a chair squatted on the bed, his head between his hands and his elbows on his knees. He began by saying that the Central Committee had kept him inactive for all that long time, firstly in order to test his loyalty, and secondly, because the moment for action had not yet come. Now, however, the members of the Committee knew that they could count upon him as one of their best and most trusted servants (here Saverio shook his head with a gesture

of perfectly sincere modesty, as though to say: 'Please don't mention it'); and, besides, the moment for action had arrived. At these words Perro paused and looked with a significant glance at Saverio; the latter made a twisted grimace as if to say: 'I am ready.'

'No one is listening?' Perro asked, this time genuinely anxious. Saverio reassured him: nobody, he said, could possibly be listening.

Then Perro, lowering his voice a little, said that perhaps he knew that the Duchess Gorina was giving a big fancy-dress party at her villa next day. Saverio replied that of course he knew it, and added the propagandist cliché that there was great indignation amongst the poor at this silly, wicked outburst of luxury and frivolity. But perhaps he didn't know, pursued Perro, that General Tereso, in person, would be present at this party? Saverio opened his eyes wide behind his glasses and made a gesture of astonishment. Yes, continued Perro, Tereso would be there, that was all arranged; and the Central Committee, considering the time to be now ripe, had decided to strike the decisive blow. For this they were relying upon him, Saverio. It was he who would have the honour of being, if not the prime mover, at any rate the instrument by which the detested regime should be finally overthrown.

These words raised Saverio into a state of exaltation that astonished even Perro, accustomed as he was to dealing with people in that state of mind. Saverio leapt to his feet and, stuttering more violently than ever, rushed to shake Perro by the hand, saying that this was the happiest day of his life, that he was absolutely ready for action and that, if necessary, he would joyfully lay down his life. At that moment all the spitefulness of the freak and the underdog, all the bookish pedantry of the propagandist, vanished; Saverio, in a trembling, ineffective manner peculiarly his own, was quite transfigured. If Perro had not been what he was, he might well have been moved – not, perhaps, at the excellence of the ideas with which Saverio was infatuated, but at his sincere and vigorous offering of his own life for the cause in which he believed. But Perro was anxious to get

his business concluded, and these outbursts on Saverio's part appeared to him in excess of what was required. There was no need for all this embarrassing enthusiasm: the usual blind credulity was quite enough. He therefore received Saverio's display of emotion in a condescending manner and, after asking whether he was prepared to listen and receiving a stammering affirmative reply, went on with his explanation. Briefly, the position was this. They would both present themselves on the following day at the Duchess's villa, and would dress themselves in her footmen's livery. He already had an understanding with the Duchess's butler, who was himself affiliated to the Party. They would thus find themselves in the midst of the entertainment and would be able to do what they wanted as regards the General. But prudence would be necessary, for it was just in cases like this, when everything seemed to go easily, that one slip might upset the most perfectly arranged plans. He had brought with him, in his suitcase, a time-bomb. He would hand over this bomb to Saverio, as being the most energetic and resolute among them. Saverio, under the pretence of bringing in a tray of food, would enter Tereso's rooms and hide the bomb in the bathroom. The bomb was an extremely powerful one and the General had little hope of escape. It would destroy not only Tereso's rooms but the whole, or nearly the whole, of the villa. It had been set to explode half an hour after it was placed in position. They would thus have time to make their escape; reaching the station, they would take the first train to the capital, where in the meantime their friends of the Committee would have started a rising. Everything was therefore organized to perfection. So much so that he, Saverio, who was now sitting there in front of him, would find himself, before three days were past, a member of the new Government which the revolution would place in power.

Perro expected that when confronted with this extraordinary proposal Saverio would be frightened, or would at least show some hesitation. But here he was wrong. Saverio leapt to his feet, saying that he was quite ready; then, deeply moved, he asked Perro if he might embrace him. What was going to happen, he said, was of so great an importance that

their pact must be sealed with a brotherly kiss. And so Perro, though filled with repugnance at this unexpected consequence of his treachery, was forced to rise to his feet and allow himself to be kissed by Saverio, and even to return his embraces. This embrace between himself and his victim might perhaps, at another moment, have amused him; but now, after two days of travelling and nervous strain, he was extremely sleepy and simply wanted to go to bed. Saverio, however, did not look at things at all in the same light. He sat down again on the bed and took off his thick glasses, showing two beautiful blue eyes with a far-away look in them such as is often to be seen in short-sighted eyes. For Saverio, despised and ill-used by his neighbours, his head filled with dreams of social regeneration, alone always with his books, was conscious of a great desire to confide in his companion. Perro, he felt, was the only person to whom he could speak with perfect sincerity. Besides, Perro inspired in him a profound, almost envious, admiration. Saverio, himself clumsy, enthusiastic, muddle-headed, admired above all things Perro's methodical, reflective calm, his slightly ironical decorum in the face of action; it was almost as though he were engaged in some complicated, graceful dance, a minuet, for instance, instead of a revolutionary plot, and the supremely important thing was not to get his steps wrong. He himself, thought Saverio, was too emotional, too passionate; he could never attain such complete self-control. The poor wretch, as can be seen, attributed Perro's impassiveness to conscious courage, whereas in reality it was due merely to the security and insensibility of the professional deceiver.

Having agreed to take part in the plot, Saverio was conscious of a sincere and profound emotion. The imminence of the danger he was preparing to face had swept away all the confusion and pedantry that had been mixed up with his ideals; and there now remained nothing but the ideals themselves, tested and purified, together with the naked emotion of a man who, for the sake of his ideals, is about to place his own life in jeopardy. He felt that Perro, at such a moment, should be experiencing a similar feeling;

and this was a rare encouragement to the making of confidences. Now that the fatal decision had been taken, he said to himself, they were no longer two agitators, two conspirators, but two men bound together by the same fate, two brothers.

He began by telling Perro that he must not think he was afraid. Not only had he no fear, but he was grateful to Perro for having at last procured him the honour to which he had so long aspired. And since he had started to speak, and there was no knowing how long it would be before they found themselves alone again, he felt he would like not merely to express his intense gratitude but also to explain the reason of it. Was Perro willing to hear him out? Perro, who was dropping with sleep, told him, nevertheless, to continue. Then Saverio, beginning from the very beginning, started to describe his state of mind at the time when he was not yet a member of the Party in which he now served. He was then, he said, merely an isolated individual, indescribably lonely and lost, tormented, helpless, vindictive, muddle-headed, and quite incapable of forming judgements either about himself or about world affairs. He had no standard of true values, no guide to help him on his way. He felt himself a pariah; and yet at times he was carried away by a vast enthusiasm, and at such moments seemed capable of great things – if only he had been granted an opportunity for action. He felt, above all things, that egoism was not enough; that it was not enough to be what is commonly called a man of honour, or a man at peace with himself and with others, caring for nothing but his own interests; that, in fact, one could not live only for oneself, with no other justification than one's own personal advantage. Instead, one must have faith in something that transcends the wretched, sterile individual, one must be obedient to some superior authority. One must practise idealism, not the low cunning of those who have no ambition except to succeed in a career. But all of a sudden, from the very day he met Perro, his whole life was changed. No more doubt, no more disgust, no more resentment, no more grievances against himself and against the world. Like a rushing wind that sweeps the clouds from

the sky, leaving it cleansed and shining, so had the act of enrolling himself as a member of the Party cleared his spirit of all impurity. Whereas before he had not known the meaning of the word 'action', and had felt himself sinking deeper every day into the poisonous bog of indecision and aimless caprice, now he was urged on by an irresistible force, now he was aware of an absolute justification behind his every word and deed. Before, there had been many roads and one seemed as good as another; now there was only one: the road along which Perro had directed him. Saverio was particularly anxious to explain the feeling inspired in him by his membership of the Party. It was a feeling of trustful abandonment, of perilous security, as though one were lifted up in the arms of a giant and carried by him wherever he wished, trusting him utterly, though without knowing where he was going. He realized that his whole life had been yearning towards this one thing – to serve blindly and with absolute loyalty, to move by command of a superior authority, to have faith in a transcendent idea. And what idea could be more exalted than that in which they believed? The world was rotten through and through and they wanted to restore it – not superficially, but right to its foundations – even if they had to destroy it and rebuild it all over again. He understood now what might have been the feeling of the first Christians who met together in the catacombs – the sweet, deep pleasure of sacrificing themselves for the greater good of humanity; the paradox of despising all that was of importance to others and of valuing highly what was generally held in contempt; and, finally, that perfect sureness of being, once and for all, beyond all possible error. All this he owed to Perro. So far he had kept silent, but now that he was preparing himself for so serious an act he felt it his duty to tell him of it. Afterwards he would return to a completely unquestioning obedience and would become merely one of the many soldiers in the Party ranks.

This singular speech interested Perro in spite of himself. He could not help reflecting that these were almost the same feelings that he himself had experienced when as a very young man he had joined the secret police. He, too, had

tasted the sweetness of a service that demanded absolute devotion and blind loyalty. He, too, the first time a somewhat delicate mission had been entrusted to him, had felt the thrill of initiation. Perro, of course, was considering only the act of service; he was not concerned with examining the difference between the greater good of humanity in which Saverio believed and the efficiency of the police to which he himself was so zealously dedicated. Following the thread of his own thoughts, Perro ended by saying to himself that with such proclivities Saverio might have made a very good secret agent. It was a pity that, instead, he had wasted such excellent qualities on becoming a revolutionary. But in any case his fate was sealed and there was nothing to be done.

Meanwhile Saverio, whose eyes were moist with emotion, had replaced his thick glasses and retired again into himself after his outburst of feeling. He asked at what time they were to present themselves at the Duchess's villa to put on their livery; and Perro, yawning, answered that they must get there very early the following morning. In the meantime he would like to stay with Saverio: perhaps he could improvise some sort of a bed for him? To have Perro staying with him seemed to Saverio too good to be true, and he told him that he must take his own bed, saying that he himself would manage somehow. But Perro objected to this. Saverio's bed, with its sheets of doubtful whiteness still disarranged from the previous night, did not attract him; so he insisted on Saverio finding him a blanket and a couple of pillows. Saverio, without replying, went out of the room to fetch them.

7

If he had been less blinded by his enthusiasm, Saverio would have noticed, as he went out, that somebody was standing just behind the door, peering through the window between the leaves of the closed shutters. Sebastiano, Saverio's half-brother, had been intrigued by the presence of Perro, whom

he had never seen before. He thought of Saverio as a kind of uncouth, stuttering monster; and Perro, with his tall, elegant figure, was the most surprising companion for him that could be imagined. It was enough to make Sebastiano follow them at a distance and peep in at the window of the outhouse.

The conversation between the two in Saverio's room had astonished Sebastiano to an extraordinary degree. 'Who could have imagined it?' he said to himself. 'I thought I had a sort of idiot in the house, and instead I find a Brutus . . .'

Sebastiano waited for Saverio to return with his load of pillows and blankets; then, seeing that the two of them were getting ready for bed, he saw that there was no further reason for spying upon them and went back into the villa.

On a rustic straw-seated chair, which had replaced the vanished furniture of the hall, he threw down his cap and whip (Sebastiano loved riding but having no horse had to content himself with going about in riding-dress) and then went up an entirely bare and unadorned staircase to the floor above. In order to get to his bedroom, which was situated in a corner of the first floor, he had to go through two or three rooms, one of which was a large drawing-room, once filled with furniture but now entirely empty. Sebastiano went through these rooms in the dark, although there were still some electric light bulbs hanging from wires which in the past had held sparkling chandeliers of Bohemian crystal. He had had this ability to find his way in the dark ever since his childhood, when, to prove to his mother that he was not afraid, he had accustomed himself to go about all over the house without turning on the lights, and – which was more difficult, since the furniture was over-crowded, in the old-fashioned style – without bumping into anything. The ingenuous Sebastiano, who believed himself to be made in a different way from other people, had come to mistake this habit of his for a special quality: he was honestly convinced that he could see in the dark like a cat.

This walking in the dark, however, spared him, above all, the sight of the squalor produced all over the house by the sale of the furniture. It made him believe, almost, that

nothing had happened, that the house was still furnished, that his mother was still alive and he himself still a little boy. During his childhood, whenever he came out of his room at night, he had had to pass through not only the drawing-room and two other smaller rooms but also a very solemn bedroom in which slept his mother in a great four-post bed. The little Sebastiano, hurrying with bare feet over the cold floors and coming into the thick darkness of this last room, filled with the presence of his sleeping mother and with the sound of her breathing, used always to say 'Good night, mamma,' in a trembling, ecstatic voice. But only in a whisper, so as not to awaken her. Then he would wriggle his way back, like a cat, to his own room and plunge with a joyous shudder under the sheets. Now, his mother dead, and the furniture, even the four-post bed, all gone to the second-hand dealer's, Sebastiano still continued to behave in exactly the same way as when he was a child. He would cross the drawing-room on tiptoe, thinking: 'I mustn't run into the console-table . . . nor the grand piano . . . and here's the red sofa'; then, holding his breath, would enter his mother's bedroom, say good night to her in a whisper, and, in great haste and still in the dark, go and undress in his own bedroom.

Sebastiano had remained an adolescent. He liked to play the game of pretending to himself that he was a completely different person from his real self. He feared boredom more than anything, and amongst all the things that produce it he had a special horror of the pedantic point of view; he liked to imagine that life was a kind of adventure in which nothing happened that was final or irreparable. He therefore preferred to think, when he went to bed and wished his mother good night, that she, who had died while still young and beautiful, was still alive. He had never – not even once – been to the cemetery where she was buried in the family tomb. And, in the same way in which he chose to ignore his mother's death, he refused to believe in the wreck of his inheritance. This attitude of incredulity permitted him never to think of it and to behave as though it had never happened.

This evening, after his usual good night to his mother,

Sebastiano, instead of taking off his clothes, sat down fully dressed on the edge of the bed in the white brilliance of the moonlight that flooded in through the curtainless windows. 'Here I am in a fine mess,' he began thinking. 'I have discovered a plot – and, what is worse, a plot that has every chance of succeeding. . . .'

Sebastiano's 'mess' was of the following nature. He was in love with Fausta Sanchez, the woman on whose account Tereso was going to the party. And he believed that she returned his love. For Fausta, however, Sebastiano's love was merely a passing adventure; and now, fearing that her relations with him might hinder the development of her ambitious projects, she had invented an elaborate story in order to get rid of him. This story was to the effect that she had a brother called Manuele (which was true), who was now in prison for political reasons (which was untrue); that Tereso had insisted on her yielding herself to him as a condition of Manuele's release; that she saw herself forced to accept these hard terms; and that, in consequence, it was better that their love affair – which was too exalted in any case to lead to any satisfactory result – should come to an end. Sebastiano, of course, had believed every syllable of this tale. He himself, therefore, had now a double purpose in view – to secure Manuele's release, and at the same time to save Fausta from having to pay for it by a surrender to the General's desires.

It might be argued that to attain his purpose Sebastiano had merely to allow the conspiracy to follow its course. Tereso dead, Manuele would come out of prison and there would be nothing to prevent Sebastiano from living in peace with his beloved Fausta.

But, in the first place, there was the danger that Fausta might perish in the ruins of the villa, and, secondly, that Tereso might be killed after, rather than before, he had had what he desired of her. Besides, Sebastiano, who did not share the enthusiasm of his half-brother, was of a nature generous enough not to wish to be the accomplice of a crime simply for his own advantage. Also he had not the slightest wish that Tereso should be assassinated.

Sebastiano was profoundly bored except when he was with Fausta. His boredom came from a complete scepticism about the destiny of humanity in general and of his country in particular. He had had no political experience. But he belonged to a generation which had been, as it were, inoculated in a pre-natal state by the recent appalling upheavals, and believed in nothing – neither in the State nor in revolution, neither in liberty nor authority. The vast majority of his contemporaries were therefore prepared to embark, without either scruples or illusions, upon some career or other. But in a few cases, like that of Sebastiano, this scepticism had led to dreaminess and boredom, to idleness and dilettantism.

Sebastiano was quite capable of seeing that Tereso's government was in many respects arbitrary and was founded wholly on force. But the idea of a government composed of people like Saverio was utterly horrifying to him. Tereso, he said to himself, at least knew how to sit a horse. In concluding thus he was following the dictates of taste, which seemed to him more reliable than any reasoning. To Sebastiano, who was very serious in his frivolity, there was no greater sin than lack of elegance and no greater inelegance than a belief in something. Now Saverio was ugly, misshapen and badly dressed, and believed in too many things. This was quite enough to make Sebastiano prefer Tereso to him and to people of his sort.

To Sebastiano scepticism was not merely a mode of thought but, in a certain sense, actually a duty. It seemed to him that, just as he had to empty his body every day so that it should not become poisoned, so must he preserve his mind from becoming obstructed and burdened with beliefs. He hated beliefs because he scented in them a weakness of which he wished to purge himself at all costs. It seemed to him that true strength should be incredulous of everything – but always graceful and easy in its gestures, like a dancer.

Sebastiano heartily detested the masses, to whose limitless imbecility he attributed the tediousness of the present period. It seemed to him that the General had already shown himself far too easy-going with them. As to what would happen

under a government of the kind that Saverio wanted to set up, Sebastiano preferred not to think of it. The masses, in all their fanatical stupidity, would then rule the roost. At this thought he felt suddenly tempted to rush off to the police and denounce the conspiracy.

Apart, however, from his repugnance to acting in any way as an informer, another consideration, a more personal and deliberate one, held him back. Though he certainly far preferred one Tereso to a hundred Saverios, nevertheless the fact remained that Tereso was laying siege to his mistress, and also that Fausta seemed to have made up her mind to yield to his blackmailing proposition in order to save her brother.

'There are several different points to be reconciled,' thought Sebastiano. 'I must frustrate the plot and at the same time prevent the horrible possibility of Fausta falling into the arms of Tereso. Again, in order to frustrate it I cannot descend to becoming an informer, which would be altogether too base and ignoble. Also I must only *half*-frustrate it, otherwise I cannot make use of it as a means of forcing Tereso to give up Fausta.'

At this point in his reflections Sebastiano began to be amused. As we have already shown, he had remained a boy. And he was strongly attracted by what he already knew of fun and adventure.

'I've somehow got to have it both ways,' he thought again. 'It's difficult; that's a thing that always is difficult. Besides, I have very little time. The Duchess's party takes place tomorrow evening. And during the party, unless I do something about it, Tereso will be killed, but not before Fausta has vainly sacrificed her honour to save her brother. . . .

'I must prevent Tereso being killed. But this I must do (1) without turning informer; (2) in such a way that he releases Manuele and does not touch Fausta; and (3) without Saverio coming to any harm.'

Sebastiano felt that there must be a solution, as in every problem rationally expounded, but he did not succeed in finding it. A merely approximate solution, in which a great

deal would be left to chance or good luck, would be useless; it must be precise, geometrical. Two and two must make four, thought Sebastiano, otherwise Manuele remains in prison and Fausta is lost.

He thought for a long time, sitting on his bed, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Finally he stuck his hand against his forehead, asking himself out loud why he had not thought of this before.

He had suddenly realized that there was one way of frustrating the plot without giving information, a way by which he could get at Tereso, obtain Manuele's pardon from him, and rescue Fausta from his clutches. And that was to take part himself in the conspiracy. By so doing he could present himself to Tereso and dictate his terms when the fuse of the bomb was, so to speak, already alight. If Tereso accepted, he would simply cut away the fuse, without revealing the names of his accomplices. If Tereso rejected his terms, Sebastiano, who had no interest in life apart from his love for Fausta, accepted the fact that he must die in company with her and the General.

He was pleased with this plan because it was bold and almost impossible. Sebastiano, beneath his frivolous attitude, was desperate. It seemed to him sweet to die with Fausta; and in comparison with that all risks became negligible. But at the same time there came to him the afterthought that it was no uncommon thing, for a general who had pledged himself to death, both to save his own skin and to win the battle. His deep, hopeless desire to die with Fausta might possibly be powerful enough to convince Tereso and so to save his own life and that of his mistress as well.

He rose from the bed, passed in the darkness through the first-floor rooms, went down the stairs and out on to the open space in front of the villa.

8

The bright moonlight made the space in front of the house look smaller than it was in reality, because of the long, motionless shadows cast across its blank surface by an irregular line of tree-tops. The night was calm, soft, and windless. Attracted by the crunch of Sebastiano's footsteps on the gravel, the dog Ludra came up to her master, whining and jumping lightly up and down beside him. Sebastiano patted her to keep her quiet. He did not yet wish to awaken the two men who were asleep in the outhouse.

He walked down the avenue and, pushing the dog back into the garden, went out of the gate. The lane was bright in the moonlight. Sebastiano followed it for some distance, but shortly before he came to the main road he turned off to the left by a side path. He went through a wood and crossed a little bridge over a deep ditch. Beyond the bridge the path ran between the wood and a high wall with branches hanging over it. This was the wall that encircled the great park belonging to the Duchess Gorina.

Sebastiano knew every inch of this path. For about three weeks he had walked along it every night at the same time to meet his mistress. He had already been to his customary appointment with her that evening. But it had been agreed between them that, if ever Sebastiano wanted for some reason to see her a second time, he was to come back and attract her attention by a special whistle. She would then come out into the park.

That night Sebastiano had left Fausta after a violent argument, at the termination of which they had decided by agreement that this was the last time they would see each other. Fausta had in fact announced that she intended to accept Tereso's conditions for her brother's release. Sebastiano, who would willingly have sacrificed Manuele (whom he did not know), seeing that all his suggestions and all his protestations were in vain, had declared that in that case he

would rather not see her again. This was just what Fausta wanted, for, as already explained, she feared that Sebastiano's love for her might create obstacles in the way of her coveted career as the General's mistress.

So they had embraced for the last time, Sebastiano with a mind distracted and eyes full of tears, Fausta feigning an equal grief and – in the absence of those tears which cannot be simulated – saying that she intended to kill herself as soon as she had obtained her brother's pardon.

These farewells had left Sebastiano profoundly depressed. Virtue did not exist, or, if it did exist, could avail nothing: of this, in his scepticism, he was convinced. But he believed, and had always believed, in luck. Now, however, even luck had deserted him. He saw before him nothing but a wretched life full of despairing memories, far from the woman he loved and whom he knew to have been defiled. If Fausta really killed herself as she threatened, he was firmly decided to put an end to his own life too.

But the luck in which Sebastiano believed and which had always come to his help in the worst moments of his life was now becoming friendly again, through the secret that he had overheard at the outhouse window. He was now going to see Fausta and tell her that he had once again found his ancient protrectress.

He followed the encircling wall for some distance until he came to one of the many entrances into the park. This gate was never used and was almost completely covered by the foliage of a wistaria. Its branches were twisted round the bars of the gate, and Sebastiano made use of them every night to climb over into the park.

Once inside, he took his way along a white gravel path beside a high, black wall which, in the brilliant moonlight, could be seen to consist of a hedge of box-trees of extraordinary size and thickness, cut into square blocks and placed close together in line following the curve of an avenue. On the farther side the box hedges framed a wide meadow which sloped down in front of the villa. Passing between two blocks of the thick hedge he came out into this meadow. It was flooded in moonlight from end to end, and the grass,

bathed in the night dew, shone like silver. On the far side rose another hedge, black and tall. The meadow lay spread out over the slope like an enormous shaggy carpet. At the top stood the Duchess's villa, reddish in colour and, in its regularity and simplicity, with its four floors and forty windows, a little like a military barracks. At the opposite end of the meadow, at the bottom of the slope, the dark waters of a little artificial lake gleamed in the moonlight. Sebastiano, raising his eyes towards the villa, saw that among the few windows still illuminated was that of Fausta.

He had made Fausta's acquaintance by chance one day during that summer when she had lost her way on a walk and had come to his house to ask for directions. Sebastiano, with the blissful, easy alacrity of a young man of twenty who, never having had an adventure, is afraid of nothing except being thought shy, had put his arm round her waist just at the moment when she, having received the information she needed, was turning away, slowly and as it were reluctantly, towards the door. He had expected a slap in the face, or at any rate a rebuff of some kind. Instead he suddenly found the lady lying in his arms, with blank, upturned eyes and parted lips. It was brought home to him at that moment how deeply his father had injured him by selling all the furniture; here he was, clasping this lovely woman in his arms and not knowing where to put her down. Then he had suddenly remembered that his one remaining farm-labourer had put some sacks full of flour in a corner of one of the empty rooms on the ground floor; and to this room, which adjoined the vestibule where they were, he had accordingly dragged Fausta, like a young lion dragging his still-living prey into his den to devour it at his leisure. In the dark room, which smelt like a granary, he had laid her gently down upon the sacks. He had feared that this makeshift arrangement, betraying, as it did, his poverty, might bring the adventure to its expected end. But Sebastiano did not know how handsome he was, with his fair hair and dark eyes and smooth skin; nor had he any idea how delicious his violence – and his flour-sacks – seemed to her.

From that day onwards they had met every night in the

park. Sebastiano had fallen madly in love with Fausta, and attributed similar feelings to her. If he had been less infatuated, he would have realized that the very facility with which she had yielded to him denoted a character entirely different from the one he imagined. But he was at the age at which every act of desire seems a surrender of true love, every sensual woman an angel.

Sebastiano was neither an aristocrat, a rich man, a leader of society, nor a celebrity. And so, without his being conscious of it, the subtle pride of knowing himself the lover of a woman who was courted by so many, of knowing, too, that the most powerful man in the country was his rival, played a considerable part in the process of his mad infatuation. He liked to think that no one knew of his love, that the world was very far from imagining that he, the lonely disinherited young man, was master of this difficult, exquisite being. Combined with this feeling was a certain sense that it was a jest, a comedy. There were moments when Sebastiano acted his love affair instead of living it.

He had no idea that, to Fausta, he was simply a new, unaccustomed taste to a spoilt and jaded palate. Fausta collected love affairs, and it seemed to her that she had now tried everything except what she called 'romantic' love. The poor young man living near the rich villa, the moonlight, the subterfuges and secrets, the solemn oaths and passionate phrases – all these were new to Fausta, who was accustomed to intrigues as rapid as they were brutal. Yet at the same time this love of Sebastiano's, just because it was romantic love, as she called it – or because, in fact, it was true love – frightened her. She did not want to be under obligations; and so Tereso's passion had come just at the right moment. She would be able simultaneously to get rid of Sebastiano, become Tereso's mistress, and procure for her brother Manuele a certain very lucrative Government contract which he had been sighing after for years. So the tale which she had told Sebastiano had had enough truth in it to justify, to some extent, the almost sincere tone of voice in which she had told it. But privately she had sworn that she would never again allow herself to be entrapped in a love

like Sebastiano's. There were, she thought, too many dangers in it, not the least of which was the danger of having to remain faithful.

Sebastiano was so absorbed in his thoughts that he scarcely knew himself to be walking; he felt almost that he was flying lightly over the dew-drenched grass as he took his way up the great meadow towards the villa. The splendour of the moonlight, silent and intense between the high, black walls of the box hedges, inspired him with a bold, crazy exaltation. He fancied himself admitting Fausta into his secret and, with her help, building up within Saverio's plot another smaller, personal plot – within the political conspiracy a love-conspiracy. He felt quite capable of himself murdering Tereso out of jealousy as a rival. After that he would either fly with Fausta or die with her. Sebastiano, as he reasoned in this way, had no idea that he was quite crazy, utterly out of touch with reality, living in a world of fantasy though at the same time moving in a world of action.

9

When he reached the villa, Sebastiano leaned against the wall and for a moment gazed dreamily at the meadow in front of him. He became aware then of a slight rustling sound and, looking down, noticed that a number of large toads were leaping about silently and nimbly in the moonlight on the grass and on the cement footpath. They were jumping here and there in an apparently thoughtful manner, with their muzzles thrust forward, their four feet seeming never to be in agreement, landing on their pale, plump paunches with their dumpy shadows following close behind. Sebastiano bent down and picked up one of them, a very large, heavy one, by its hind foot, just at the moment when it was preparing to leap. The toad struggled, dangling in the air, then remained motionless, pretending to be dead but showing plenty of life in its little, wide-open eyes. Sebastiano, with his other hand, took hold of it by the back like a

crab. The toad started gesticulating wildly with its four feet. And now its eyes, like two glass blobs among the bumps and warts of its flat head, looked as though they would swell till they burst like two soap-bubbles; and its white paunch twitched convulsively.

Still holding the toad in his hand, Sebastiano stopped under Fausta's window and gave a low melancholy whistle like the call of a hunter. Almost immediately a shadow appeared in the window through the slats of the closed shutters; and a hand was thrust forth, the fingers making a sign as though telling him to wait.

He did not wait long. In a moment one of the ground-floor windows opened slowly, first one shutter and then the other, and Fausta appeared on the threshold. She was dressed in a long black silk gown with a low neck and silvery trimmings which gleamed in the moonlight, as did the diamonds on the hand with which she opened the shutter.

Fausta's face was like that of a very dark boy. The same almost invisible down that is to be seen on the cheeks of young boys softened its round outline. But her eyes, black and widely opened, curiously opaque and with no light in them – blind, one might almost say – were characteristic of a woman of her type, far removed from all innocence; and the thin eyebrows, raised and pointed like two circumflex accents – the kind of eyebrows that form part of an actor's make-up for the role of Mephistopheles – added a touch of cruelty, of ruthlessness, to the dull inexpressiveness of the eyes. She had a short, sensual, blunt nose, a small, tight, fleshy mouth in which the sharp white eye-teeth became visible even at the slightest smile, and a broad, rounded jaw rather like that of a cat. She wore her hair very short, like a boy's; but it was set in a crisp, uneven style that was purely feminine, and arranged so as to suggest almost that it had been roughly and forcibly clipped. She was spare and slenderly built, and her brown skin had an almost burnt look. All softness seemed to have deserted her thin limbs and to have concentrated itself in her heavy, rounded breasts, large but delicate and tender – the only feminine feature of her masculine figure, yet enough to be a vivid reminder to

anyone who looked at her that she was, after all, a woman, and not merely a woman but, by contrast, more of a woman than most. She seemed aware of this, for she carried these voluptuous charms with an ostentatious sort of vanity, throwing back her head and shoulders as she moved.

Fausta had come down from her room with reluctance. She was afraid lest her lover had already repented of his uncompromising attitude and had come back to announce that he would continue to love her even if she gave herself to Tereso. She knew by experience that love, so justly called blind, would sometimes submit to the deepest humiliations, the most abject compromises, rather than release its prey. 'But this time,' she thought as she came downstairs, 'this time I shall tell him the truth, and then at last he will leave me in peace.' Fausta was spurred to this resolve by the sort of cruel obstinacy that animates a housewife who sees a chicken still struggling after she has wrung its neck, and decides to give it the *coup de grâce* by cutting its throat into the bargain.

She appeared on the doorstep with a frowning, anxious face and eyes full of ill-will under their arched eyebrows. But Sebastiano, convinced that he had found the thread to lead him out of the labyrinth in which he was entrapped, was now in jovial mood and not in the least anxious to enter at once upon the disagreeable subject of their future relations. He showed her the toad, which he was still grasping by its back, and told her that on his way home the creature had stopped him and prayed to be taken to the lovely Fausta, about whom all the toads in the neighbourhood were talking. This whimsical remark pleased Fausta, who had been expecting a jealous scene, and, without displaying any of the repugnance that women usually feel for these warty amphibians, she put out her long, thin, brown hand with its sparkling diamonds and poked the closed mouth of the toad with the scarlet tip of her nail.

'He wants to give you a kiss,' said the infatuated Sebastiano, full of inventiveness.

'A kiss?' she repeated, arching her eyebrows agreeably, 'a kiss – where?'

'Here,' said Sebastiano, pointing to her ear, half hidden by her hair.

Fausta had small, perfectly shaped ears, which Sebastiano never tired of praising whenever he saw her. Intrigued, she said that the toad was a bold fellow; but she already felt an interest in this new, monstrous sensation, and inquired cautiously whether the toad would bite her and whether it was poisonous. When Sebastiano replied that there was nothing to fear, she threw away the cigarette which she held between her fingers and languidly brushed aside her short hair, uncovering her small round ear. Sebastiano held the toad's mouth close to it.

'He is talking to me!' she exclaimed after a moment, with a shrill laugh; and indeed the toad had moved its mouth as if it wanted to whisper something to her. But the toad had also kissed the lobe of her ear, she added, and it was a curious sensation; its lips were cold as crystal, like the night itself.

Sebastiano then put the toad down on the ground, telling it to go and announce its extraordinary good fortune to its friends. Then, rising, he asked Fausta what the toad had said to her.

'It told me that you and I must part,' she said, looking at him seriously.

This interlude with the toad had sufficed to cool Sebastiano's excitement and to make him change his mind again. It was true, he was sure, that Fausta loved him; but the fact that she had resigned herself to accept Tereso's condition in order to save her brother did not show an excessive strength of mind, and such a person certainly had not the makings of a conspirator. He suddenly thought it would be better to tell her nothing and to act without her knowledge. Once again fortune favoured Sebastiano. For if Fausta had known of the plot she would not have hesitated to denounce the whole lot of them without exception, including Sebastiano himself. Sebastiano first of all, in fact, for she would have been delighted to be rid of him and at the same time to get into Tereso's good graces, and would have felt that she was protecting not only Tereso but her own personal plans and Manuele's future as well.

Sebastiano therefore, after coming back to the villa and bringing Fausta down from her room, had nothing to say to her. But the words that she had put into the mouth of the toad went to his heart like the stab of a dagger. He answered her by asking sadly whether she disliked the idea of their relationship continuing as much as she seemed to. But, he added, she need not worry, for he had only come back in order to say a last, final farewell. Fausta laughed, reassured, and put out her mouth for him to kiss.

'So it is really decided?' Sebastiano asked timidly after he had kissed her. He still hoped that she might sacrifice her brother for his sake, not so much because he now thought this sacrifice necessary as because it would have given him a proof of her love. But Fausta, glad of an opportunity to reiterate the necessity of their parting, replied that there was nothing to be done. He must not try to insist, nor must he embitter their last moments together. If she wanted to save her brother she must yield. It was hateful, not only to do so, but even to think of it; but she could see no way out. She spoke in a sorrowing tone which suggested that she was going to her death rather than setting out upon a new love affair.

'Perhaps we might meet again tomorrow – during the day, I mean – for the last time?' Sebastiano asked. And though he knew he was trying to deceive himself his eyes suddenly filled with tears.

'I don't think so,' Fausta answered, kindly but firmly.

Sebastiano loved Fausta so passionately that, although he knew it was not really the last time he would see her, he nevertheless had all the feelings which belong to a final farewell. He experienced a mingled sweetness and bitterness, and at the same time was possessed by a furious, insatiable desire to gaze closely at those beloved features, to stamp them deeply upon his memory. Their farewells were long protracted. He could never weary of kissing those lips, that neck, those eyes; and Fausta accepted his desperate hunger as the final thrill of a love affair that had already given her many thrills. More than once Sebastiano, instead of pressing a final kiss upon the hand she gave him, seized the hand

and drew her to him again for another mad, sweet embrace. At last they separated, and Fausta ran off along the wall of the villa, dark in the brilliant moonlight. Sebastiano knew that the moment had now come when he must occupy himself actively with Saverio's plot.

*

In great haste he went back over the way he had come, and as he went he thought over everything he had decided to do and say. In any case it was merely a question of making a choice, for – quite apart from having overheard the conversation of the two conspirators through the window and thus obtaining a pretty exact idea of their motives in the attempt on Tereso's life – it would certainly not be difficult for him to produce arguments against the General's government, considering the incessant chatter and discussion that had gone on for years throughout the country; even a child brought up amongst such political murmurings could have recited them by heart. And, on the other hand, Sebastiano felt himself inspired with the providential, lightning-quick lucidity which usually comes to the aid of rash men in their most risky undertakings. He felt capable not merely of improvising the language and spirit of a plotter but of behaving, that night, as though in all his life he had had no thought but of overthrowing Tereso's Government.

There were two ways by which he might get himself admitted into the conspiracy: either he might rouse Saverio gently and confide first in him; or he might burst into the outhouse and make an immediate proclamation of his intentions. He chose the second method as being the more expeditious; also he rather liked the theatrical quality of this sudden declaration of faith, because he felt it might disguise his real lack of sincerity.

And so, all of a sudden, there appeared to the two sleepy, dazed conspirators Sebastiano, terrible and beautiful as an announcing archangel in the brilliant, startling illumination.

'I am here to join you,' he said. 'I heard all you said, I agree with all your ideas, I beg you to make use of me and to let me share in your plan of action.'

Before the pair could recover from their surprise (Saverio's hand had reached for the pistol that he kept always under his pillow) there poured from Sebastiano a flood of words proving his good faith, a torrent of fraudulent arguments, of disingenuous requests, of loftily-expressed blackmail. The idea of saving Fausta from Tereso's clutches made him eloquent and perfectly sincere, so that in a very short time Saverio – who, as we have seen, cherished a curious sort of affection for his half-brother – was fully convinced of the genuineness of his proposal. As for Perro, he neither believed nor disbelieved. However the affair went, his own position was not affected. What could it matter to him if there were one conspirator more or less? Now that the machine had been set in motion, it merely meant that Sebastiano, for reasons known only to himself, would share the fate of Saverio; that was all. So while a sort of recognition scene was going on between Saverio and Sebastiano – just as though the latter had that moment arrived back from a long journey to a distant land and Saverio were recollecting his appearance gradually, bit by bit – Perro, leaning his elbow on the pillow, waited sleepily for their affecting conversation to end. Saverio jumped right out of bed in his enthusiasm, showing his naked body all sinewy and gnarled like the trunk of a tree, and embraced Sebastiano. Then he turned towards Perro and asked what task should be assigned to his half-brother. 'I will answer for him', he kept repeating, 'I will answer for him.' Perro, speaking slowly and with studied coldness, said that he could come and put on a footman's livery too, provided he kept his mouth shut. At these words Sebastiano, taking his cue from Saverio's excited demonstrations, felt it advisable to go and shake Perro warmly by the hand. The latter, however, told him to think the matter over carefully, because there was quite a chance that he might not come out of it with a whole skin. But Sebastiano, in perfect sincerity and thinking of Fausta, answered that he had made up his mind. Perro then explained that he must come back again early next morning and they would all go together to the Duchess's villa. Perro thought he was deceiving Sebastiano, and Sebastiano thought

he was deceiving Perro; but the only one who was really deceived was Saverio.

Finally Perro turned his face to the wall and went to sleep again, while Saverio, crazed with enthusiasm, made Sebastiano sit on the bed close beside him and started to explain the workings of the plot and how they intended to put it into effect. Again and again during his explanations he came back to the theme of how they were fighting, and would perhaps give their lives, to bring freedom and a better future to mankind and to inaugurate a new world – a distressing and profound subject which lay deep in Saverio's mind and to which he kept on returning with real emotion, like a musician coming back again to the main theme of his composition. But Sebastiano saw Saverio merely as a deluded fool, and thought only of Fausta. As for Perro, he thought of him as a more serious, and therefore more dangerous, type than Saverio. But he did not despair of being able to fool him as well. He was certainly a little surprised at the readiness with which Perro, who seemed so much more cautious than Saverio, had accepted his proposal. But he was reassured by the thought that all these conspirators, even when they appeared, like Perro, to be prudent and to know what they were doing, were fundamentally mere fanatics.

At last, at a very late hour, Sebastiano and Saverio separated.

'Let us embrace,' Saverio suggested again as he accompanied Sebastiano from the outhouse. 'From today onwards we are truly brothers.'

Sebastiano was quite unable to understand all this enthusiasm for the future of the world. He himself would not have lifted a finger to save and redeem mankind. But he was quite willing to let his half-brother embrace him. As for Saverio, he was in such a state of confusion and exaltation that, before finally leaving Sebastiano, he felt he must make a short speech in praise of Perro, who had remained asleep in the outhouse.

'He is a leader of men,' said Saverio, 'so much stronger, so much wiser, so much more resolute than we are. We must

all imitate him, we must take him as our model. . . . What can *we* do? We are just private soldiers, and we know it . . . but he – he is born to command. And a proof of that is that he can sleep so quietly on the eve of a fateful day like tomorrow.'

To this Sebastiano, who had not found Perro particularly agreeable and who did not feel in the least inferior or like a 'private soldier', as Saverio had tried to make out, made no reply. Saverio went back into the outhouse; and Sebastiano, passing as usual through the dark, empty rooms of the house, at last retired to bed.

10

The three men rose next morning in states of mind that varied considerably according to the private preoccupations of each. Perro, refreshed by sleep and extremely calm, was now feeling completely self-confident, and therefore free in his mind and more coldly calculating than ever. Saverio, who had not closed an eye during the whole night, was in a state of even greater exaltation and excitement than in the evening before. Sebastiano, aware of the risks he was running between the police on the one hand and the conspirators on the other, was watchful and intent on playing his part. He and Perro instinctively felt themselves superior to Saverio and in a way were spying upon each other. Perro did this more from professional habit than from mistrust; accustomed to divide men into only two categories – the guardians, and the breakers, of the law – he said to himself that Sebastiano, who was certainly not an agent of the police, must therefore be a criminal. And what did one conspirator more or less matter to him? His net was capacious enough to catch not one but ten fish as big as that. Nevertheless, the manner in which Sebastiano had presented himself, the odd fact that he had been an eavesdropper to their conversation, caused him instinctively to mistrust him. Had he not been so completely sure of never having seen him in

police circles, he might almost have suspected him of being another *agent provocateur*. Sebastiano, on his side, found Perro altogether too calm and self-controlled. Even in a man born, as Saverio said, to command, such serenity appeared to him excessive. On the other hand he was afraid lest Perro might discover that he neither was, nor desired to be, a real conspirator, but that he had in fact decided to frustrate the plot simply for his own ends. He also feared some underhand trick. He had heard of the summary executions of disloyal conspirators and *agents provocateurs* at the hands of their comrades, executions described as secret, brutal and pitiless; and he felt that to end with a rope round his neck or a bullet through his head at the hand of Saverio would be, in the general absurdity of life, altogether too absurd a death.

That morning therefore, all the way from Sebastiano's house to the Duchess's villa, while Saverio, according to custom, wandered from one subject to another, preaching and declaiming, there was a continual skirmishing between the other two, with questions and answers, with cautious investigations and no less cautious dissimulations. Perro was trying to find out why in the world a young man of the upper classes, scarcely grown up, handsome, frivolous, had taken it into his head to overthrow the Government and initiate a new order; while Sebastiano was cautiously seeking to discover how in the world Perro could remain so cold and formal at a moment like this. In answer to Perro's questions, Sebastiano replied that for some time now he had been aware of the inadequacy of his selfish, pleasure-seeking life; that he had felt the need to put his faith in some transcendent cause, to serve that cause and fight for its ultimate victory; that he was ready even, if necessary, to die, since he saw clearly that life was not worth living if one lived entirely for oneself: in fact he repeated, in a slightly modified form, all the things he had heard from Saverio. 'The Devil take it!' Perro said to himself, observing Sebastiano's handsome face, so strangely lit up as he recited these phrases; 'all these fellows are dying to serve and believe in something!' In reality Sebastiano was all the time thinking of Fausta; and the fervour that so astonished Perro was produced by a mere

substitution of words. Love of mankind was love of Fausta; 'the cause' was Fausta; the obstacles in the path of the revolution were Tereso and Manuele, who obliged him to part from Fausta; and finally, the selfish, epicurean life that he now despised was his own life before he met Fausta. After answering Perro's questions, however, he went over to the counter-offensive and in a friendly manner declared that he very much admired him for retaining so much self-control in the present circumstances. He himself, for instance, however hard he tried to control himself, could not quite succeed in repressing a certain agitation. 'Devil take it!' thought Perro again, 'our friend is observant. . . .' Then assuming an incisive, terse manner, firm and at the same time full of latent significance, and looking Sebastiano straight in the eyes, he replied that he was accustomed to this sort of thing, and that was why he remained so calm. But he, too, at the beginning of his career as a revolutionary, had often felt he was on the point of losing his head. Besides, it was essential that somebody should keep calm. Saverio certainly was not calm and never would be, and as he had not yet seen him put to the test he must himself take full responsibility. And he smiled in Saverio's direction with a look of sympathetic complicity which Sebastiano could not help returning.

In truth, the nearer they came to the Duchess's villa the more elated and the more uncontrolled did Saverio become. He was walking in front of the others, whirling a stick that he had pulled from a hedge with a whistling sound in the air; the freshness of the morning, still cold and misty, intoxicated him, till he seemed to himself to be no longer the old, stuttering Saverio, but a ruthless executioner, preordained by fate, an adventurous, fearless conspirator, a man of action on the march towards a shining goal.

'It may seem to you strange,' he began, just as they crossed the little bridge over the ditch, 'it may seem to you absurd – but we three, at this moment, are making history. . . . Who would think so, to look at us? We look simply like three men who have got up very early and are walking through a wood, whereas perhaps in reality, as a result of

this morning walk of ours, there will arise a whole new world, a new mode of feeling, a new civilization, a new period of history. . . . Here one can see the force of the spirit, its superiority over brute matter. If this thing that we have decided to do is successful, in centuries to come people will still be talking of this walk of ours which seems like so many other walks. They will speak of it with wonder and with gratitude, as of something legendary, mythical, prophetic. They will say that we three, on that far-off distant morning, had faith in the destiny of man and of human society against all the obscure forces that sought to keep them in brutishness and barbarism. . . . Do you not believe me? I tell you that people will come here on pilgrimages . . . and yet we are just three men who are simply going to do what we consider our duty. . . . Don't you see? That is how history is made – on mornings like this – on woodland paths like this – by people with faces like ours. . . .'

'Be careful, don't shout so loud,' said Perro, to whom all this meant nothing – except that Saverio was making mountains out of molehills. 'We're behind a wall which is probably guarded by police officers every hundred yards.'

'What do I care?' answered Saverio, shrugging his shoulders. Then he went on: 'Look over there, how the sun shines as it rises behind the white trunks of the birch trees! How fresh the air is, how pure, as it comes up from the hoar frost on the grass! How sweet the flowers smell as they open their petals! Listen to the birds singing in the trees as they awake and salute the sun! Ah, this is nature, always the same whether man is free or in bondage. What is there to prevent us from enjoying life? In a moment the sun will be high in the heavens and everywhere will be heard the murmuring of insects among the flowers. We might abandon everything and, instead of going to the Duchess's villa, turn off here to the right and take a morning's ramble through the countryside, content to dream instead of to act. But we shall turn to the left. We shall go where danger threatens, where perhaps death awaits us. . . . Who will then have the courage to deny the existence of the spirit, to deny that it is

a more concrete, a more palpable, a more powerful thing than all visible reality? Who will deny the existence of the soul, of the liberty of man?'

With such words Saverio, flushed with optimism and energy, sought to express the fervour and passion of his spirit. To Perro, enclosed in the impenetrable armour of his falseness, his words seemed merely comic and distasteful. But upon Sebastiano, who, being young and in love, was more susceptible to expressions of idealism, they had quite a different effect. Though he did not share his half-brother's enthusiasm, he nevertheless felt that it was genuine, and recognized in his words a sincerity and an originality that Saverio's uncouth appearance would never have led one to suspect.

'Come, my friends,' concluded Saverio when he had finished his harangue, 'let us sing in chorus like soldiers marching to battle.' And without troubling to see whether the others joined in he began, in his shrill voice, to chant the *Marseillaise*. The other two, for reasons of their own, had not the courage to sing with him. But Saverio did not notice this; he walked in front, his stick whistling through the air as he cut off the heads of imaginary enemies of the people; and his voice, stammering and out of tune, rose high in the numbed stillness of the misty morning, painfully exultant and with distressing mistakes in French pronunciation which caused shivers to run down Sebastiano's back.

And so, with Saverio singing and making speeches, Perro trying to keep him quiet, and Sebastiano thinking sometimes of Fausta and sometimes forced into listening to his half-brother's strange rhapsodies, they took their way along the path in the pure, joyful light of the serene morning. Every now and then a ray of sunshine shot, like a sudden exclamation, through the trunks of the birch trees, lighting up the three men, the path, the old wall. In the wood could be heard the chatter of little streams running over the rocks, and there was a smell of damp earth and moss in the air, still sharp after the night frost. Saverio was all wrong, Sebastiano could not help thinking; this was a morning to go out shooting, or to walk through the woods picking mushrooms

and cyclamen, not to weave plots against an elderly general, over tiresome questions that were not worth a single one of the flowers that grew along the edge of the path. And yet, he considered, he was the only one of the three who had valid reasons for giving up these pleasures. Fausta was fresher and more thrilling than all the purity and fragrance of the morning, sweeter than the sunshine when it shone upon them, more beautiful than all the beauties of nature.

They reached the gate which Sebastiano, the evening before, had climbed on the way to his meeting with Fausta, and, pulling themselves up by the wistaria branches, jumped down on the other side of the wall. Then they followed the avenue beneath the austere green wall of the box hedge. Here and there between the box trees were gaps through which they caught a glimpse of a little white marble temple, of a pool in which swans slowly sailed, of a secret enclosure with a mossy, weather-stained seat round it, enlivened by a circle of gesturing statues. The sun was rapidly mounting the sky and brilliant shafts of light infiltrated to every point, bringing a smile to the face of this combed and civilized nature. The attitudes of the sculptured figures assumed a discreet playfulness in spite of the grime which clothed their rounded limbs; the green water in the marble basins reflected sky and trees and the graceful, faintly-trembling inverted images of the swans; and the great peacocks as they emerged tottering on to the grass began, with legs stretched wide, to unfold their fans of gilded plumage in the early sunshine.

Perro, immersed in his plans, observed these beauties with a distracted eye. Sebastiano, as he drew nearer to Fausta, could not help remembering the many nights on which he had strolled, closely entwined with his beloved, among the pools and the simpering statues. But Saverio, after his distressing burst of inspiration, succumbed again to the mania for political propaganda. Certainly this park was extremely beautiful, he said, there was no doubt about it; the form of civilization now on its deathbed would at least be able to leave behind it these monuments of its taste. But it was scandalous that a few privileged people should enjoy all

these delights; scandalous that an unwarlike, corrupt oligarchy should have the sole right to such a place for its own private amusements; scandalous, in fact, that so much beauty should be forbidden to the majority who were the most deserving of it. Tomorrow this park would be open to all; all would be permitted to improve their minds with the sight of these beauties; all would be able to enjoy this peaceful solitude. Besides, if the dying civilization had been capable of creating ten such places, the new civilization, the one which they were perhaps inaugurating with this morning walk of theirs, would create a hundred of them. Greater liberty would produce greater beauty, and more of it. . . . And so on. Perro, now that they were approaching the villa, no longer found him even comic, and fearing a premature arrest which would have sent the whole of his intrigue sky-high, besought him to be quiet. But Sebastiano went on thinking about Fausta. Passing by a seat upon which he and she had sat together for a long time the night before, he had caught sight of her handkerchief on the ground and had picked it up. It was soaked with dew, but had still a perfume about it like that of the grass itself. Sebastiano, in a dream of delight, allowed the other two to go on ahead, and so his discovery was not noticed. Walking behind the taciturn Perro and the chattering Saverio, he clutched the handkerchief in his fist and pressed it against his lips.

As they came out into the opening, the villa became suddenly visible, looking very cold and solid with all its windows shut: the guests were not yet awake. Saverio observed sarcastically that all these refined gentlefolk, fatigued with doing nothing, slept heavily; at this hour the peasants had already been for some time busy at their work in the fields. But Perro, thoroughly sincere for once, said he envied them; after his short disturbed night, in spite of a deceptive clear-headedness when he awoke, he could feel the desire for sleep going to his brain like strong wine. Sebastiano's eyes travelled at once to the closed shutters of Fausta's room; for a moment her figure was superimposed upon them, faint and melancholy as a ghost in its diaphanous black dress, smiling at him, it seemed, and making ghostly signs with its head. A

great deserted silence enveloped the house. The sun, though it was already sending long swords of light across the sloping meadow, lit up only one corner of the villa; all the rest of the façade was still veiled in deep shadow.

II

Perro, who apparently already knew the place, went straight round behind the house to a small, unimportant-looking door and, telling his companions that they must now, so to speak, put on their masks, rang the bell. Immediately, and with a promptness that astonished Sebastiano, the door opened and the butler appeared. He was a thickset, broad-shouldered man, with a round, bald head and a pale face like an unhealthy moon, and was dressed in a striped working-jacket and black trousers. This man, who was also in the pay of the police as an informer and a spy of minor rank, had been told of the fake conspiracy by Perro some time before. Like the Police Commissioner of Antigua, he did not approve of these dangerous methods, but he had to obey.

The butler, speaking in a low voice and looking, not at the faces of the three men, but at the sky, said that they had arrived only just in time, and led them into the basement of the villa. One single passage, narrow, bare and gloomy, wound about like a maze in this part of the house, and endless rooms, large and small, led off it. Just as though they were important guests he showed them the vast, complicated kitchen, like a laboratory with its many stoves and pipes rising to the ceiling; two or three rooms in which men and women were cleaning and putting in order the shoes and clothes of the guests; and – after passing numbers of small servants' bedrooms, still untidy and smelling heavy and musty after the night – he even showed them the woodshed, the pantry and the storerooms. Saverio, having been forbidden to speak, said nothing; but he relieved his feelings by exchanging significant glances with his two companions as if to say: this is where the poor labour in order to keep

the rich happy and well fed. Finally the butler led them into a kind of dressing-room where a row of green-painted iron lockers stood facing a row of grey cement shower-baths and wash-basins. He opened one of the lockers and showed them their liveries hanging all ready on hooks inside. Then, telling them to get dressed and join him in the kitchen, he left them.

They dressed in the dismal, icy, underground room, which smelt like a soldiers' wash-house and a hospital combined. Perro, when he was ready, looked a very questionable sort of footman, with an appearance altogether too elegant and formal – so much the footman, in fact, that it seemed doubtful whether he could be a footman at all. Sebastiano looked more like an impersonation than either of the others – almost as though he were one of the Duchess's guests trying on an eighteenth-century cavalier's costume for the fancy-dress ball that evening. The most convincing-looking flunkey of the three was Saverio, whose livery seemed to show off all his most essentially ill-bred points, his squat figure, his general uncouthness, and shapelessness. He looked as though in all his life he had never worn anything but a braided tail-coat, knee-breeches and white stockings. The stockings displayed his disproportionately large, plebeian calves, just as the coat, of heavy material and plastered with gold braid, seemed to show off the thick, slightly humped shape of his shoulders – the shoulders of one who is used to carrying burdens. Perro remarked that spectacles looked a bit odd on a footman, but that, on the whole, he had seen worse. Then they held a short council of war. It was decided that Perro should see to the concealment of the bomb for the moment and that the other two were to take their orders from him. Then they left the dressing-room and went to the kitchen.

The butler, as soon as he saw them come in, left a group of other menservants whom he was instructing and came forward quickly to meet them. This was not so much out of deference to Perro as from a desire not to create confusion among the staff for which he was responsible. These three intruders, as well as Perro's numerous other agents who had

arrived the evening before, must not be allowed to mix with the real menservants but must be kept apart on unimportant tasks, in out-of-the-way corners. The butler, fearing some catastrophe, was cursing the day in which he had been forced to take part in these intrigues; was cursing the police and cursing General Tereso. 'I would give a whole year's tips and still think myself lucky,' he thought, 'if I could get through till tomorrow morning without any disasters.' But none of these thoughts was visible in his face, round as a ball, on which the long moustaches faded into the dirty shadow of the unshaven beard (he usually shaved just before luncheon, at midday, so as to appear before his employers with a fresh, clean face; and he had a second shave in the evening, just before dinner). He told the three men that he had three separate jobs for them and that they must be careful to do exactly as they were told, otherwise there would be a muddle.

Leading the way, the butler took them up a small winding stair cut in the thickness of the wall, till they came to a little door which, when opened, proved to be simply one of the frescoed panels of a vast hall from which the stately main staircase led to the rooms above. From this hall he led them through various rooms to the right wing of the villa. The windows of the reception-rooms at this hour were still closed and the air was full of the smoke and stuffiness of the evening before. Everywhere in these great white-and-gold rooms could be seen the traces of the Duchess's house-party – ash-trays full of cigarette-ends, seats and armchairs disarranged by groups of talkers, piles of counters and disordered packs of cards on little green tables, carpets ruffled, half-empty bottles, dirty glasses, vases full of faded flowers whose petals were scattered over marble table-tops. Saverio looked at all these things with the eye of a political agitator and, anxious to test the reactions of the butler, suddenly remarked that all this waste and disorder made one think by contrast of the poor homes of the Antigua workmen, and that in fact such injustice, such disparity of lot were intolerable and ought to be abolished. The butler, who had been for some time secretly studying the faces of Sebastiano and

Saverio and wondering whether they were, so to speak, the hare or the hounds, replied with ill-concealed embarrassment that he was quite right; it was certainly so. But inwardly he thought: 'You d—d scoundrel . . . if there were no more rich people what should I do? Be a policeman, eh? What would my wife and children do? But, luckily, tomorrow you'll be in the lock-up, and a very good thing too. . . . You've certainly asked for it.' But his eye, doubly trained by his avowed duties as a butler and his secret duties as an informer, had perceived in Sebastiano's face something rather unusual, the expression, that is, of a man who is accustomed to command and not to serve – not even to serve the police. It seemed to him odd that a person of that kind should have got himself mixed up, in company with a bumpkin like Saverio, in a plot staged by the police. 'You would think he was one of Her Excellency's guests,' thought the butler, 'not a police agent like Perro or a lout like the other fellow. . . . What's his idea in this intrigue? Is it perhaps just to amuse himself or try a new sensation?' By which it can be seen that the butler, long accustomed to service with people of Sebastiano's kind, had come very near the truth. But it must also be observed that the butler, though he had taken a profound dislike for different reasons both to Perro and Saverio, did not therefore look with any greater sympathy upon Sebastiano, though he had placed him at the first glance as belonging to the class which provided him and his children with a living. The butler was essentially of the servant class, neither patrician nor plebeian, wavering always between envy and respect, between sarcasm and flattery; he was incapable of loving anyone, even himself, for by dint of always wearing livery and bowing and obeying orders he no longer even knew whether he liked or hated his own profession. However, these feelings were fugitive and vague; his dominant sensation at the moment was one of disgust and fear at being forced to participate in an intrigue which he instinctively felt to be pregnant with troubles and dangers.

Perro had already spoken to the butler about Saverio, describing him as an idiot and a fanatic and advising that he

should be given some entirely unimportant job so that he would have no chance of behaving in his usual indiscreet manner. The butler took the three men by another small staircase to the second floor and led them down a long corridor, flanked with many doors, right to its furthest end where, beneath a large indicator-board full of numbers, sat a girl all alone. Saverio, said the butler, was also to sit under the indicator, and every time one of the numbers jumped up and the girl went to take orders from the various rooms he was to give notice of it by telephone to the kitchens. The girl did not think Saverio worth even a glance when he sat down, extremely embarrassed, on the other side of the table. She was reading a novel with a brightly-coloured cover on which Sebastiano, always curious about women of whatever walk in life, managed to read, slantwise: *Forsaken on Her Wedding-Day*.

Having disposed of Saverio, the butler took Perro and Sebastiano to the other end of the corridor and thence, through a couple of anterooms, into a short gallery, vaulted and highly decorated, with only three doors opening out of it, all of them surmounted with marble coats-of-arms and friezes. This, he announced, was known as 'The Gallery of Busts'. He told them that this gallery, so called because of the busts of Pizarro, Cortez and other Conquistadors which stood all along one side between the windows, was the most luxurious and imposing part of the house and was usually kept for distinguished guests. At the end of the gallery was a fourth door, loftier and more ornate than the others and this, he explained, was the door of the chapel. Of the other three doors, the first led into the Duchess's own apartments, the second into the suite reserved for Tereso, and the third into that of the Countess Sanchez – at which name Sebastiano's heart at once began to beat faster. The butler ended by saying that they were to remain in this gallery and be ready to attend upon these three important personages.

Still with an air of stiff and surly deference, he then took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door of Tereso's suite. This suite consisted of a small vestibule, a bedroom, a bathroom and a study. The butler went to the

two windows of the bedroom and threw open the shutters. Then, leaning against the window-sill, he pointed out the great white-and-gold bed and related how the heads of many illustrious guests – princes, ambassadors, politicians, generals – had rested upon its pillows. He knew quite well that these two were not much interested in learning of such things, about which most visitors to the villa were so inquisitive; in relating them he was merely yielding to the almost unconscious vanity of a servant in a great house. Then Perro, guessing his uneasiness and wishing to frighten him, said jokingly that he was forgetting the best story of all – that in that same bed Venustiano Valdez, the president who had been in power immediately before Tereso, had slept the last sleep of his life before being taken away under escort to Antigua and there shot against a wall – by order of his successor. 'A strange coincidence,' concluded Perro, winking at Sebastiano. The butler gave him a quick glance, his eyes large and round with fright; then he said he had things to do and went out hurriedly.

After he had gone Perro took an expensive cigar from a box on the bedside table, lit it, and sat down in an armchair at the foot of the bed, crossing his legs. He had not yet given up his attempt to find out who Sebastiano really was and, with this purpose in view, began with a wealth of detail to describe the means by which the assassination would be carried out. Saverio would bring up the bomb on a tray, concealing it with one of these metal dish-covers that are used for keeping food hot. He would go into the General's bathroom and place the bomb in the little cupboard where the towels were kept. In the meantime Perro and some of his assistants would be on guard in the gallery. Saverio, after depositing the bomb, would come back into the gallery, having locked both the cupboard and the bathroom door. They would all make their escape together; half an hour later the bomb would go off, blowing up the villa and burying Tereso and everyone else in the ruins.

Perro spoke slowly, mouthing his words beneath his neat moustache and pausing every now and then to inhale the smoke of his cigar and to look with a sly, sardonic glance at

his companion. Sebastiano, standing in front of him, listened with horror – not so much at the brutality of the intended murder as at the thought of his beloved Fausta's danger. 'If I hadn't listened at Saverio's window,' he thought, 'not only would Fausta have had to yield to Tereso's demands, but she would have perished with him into the bargain, in his arms, beneath the ruins of the villa.' In the coincidence that allowed him not only to save Fausta but at the same time to preserve his love for her unsullied he recognized yet another manifestation of the good luck in which he so firmly believed.

Hoping to discern some sign of fear in Sebastiano, Perro emphasized the tremendous power of the bomb and the many dangers involved. But Fausta alone occupied Sebastiano's mind; and he, in turn, was puzzled and surprised at Perro's polite and elegant intrepidity. 'My goodness, Saverio is right, he's a real professional terrorist,' he thought, astonished. Perro, on his side, was thinking: 'This chap is a proper tough nut; he doesn't blink an eyelid.'

Sebastiano, who now had a plan of his own, suddenly asked Perro what he himself was to do while they were mounting guard in the gallery and while Saverio was hiding the bomb. Perro, whose aim was to catch the two half-brothers in the very act, replied after a moment's reflection that he had better help Saverio to place the bomb in position, since two were always better than one. But Sebastiano said that Saverio could quite well manage it by himself and that he would merely get in his way. He thought it would be better for him to take up his position in one of the two rooms adjoining Tereso's – the Countess Sanchez's for instance – and there, armed, he could keep watch in case anyone tried to spy upon their preparations. This ingenuous proposal, which was suggested to Sebastiano not by the real requirements of the plot but by a desire to be able to enter Tereso's room without warning and interrupt his interview with Fausta in the nick of time, was almost his undoing. 'Why take up a position in an adjoining room?' thought Perro; 'what's the use of that?' But good luck again befriended Sebastiano, and suggested to Perro that after all it

might be more convenient to arrest the two half-brothers separately than together. Being both of them strong and energetic, they might try to defend themselves; and Cinco had expressly desired that there should not be any kind of disturbance. So Perro for the moment gave up trying to guess the hidden purpose in Sabastiano's mysterious proposal, though instinct made him certain that in it somehow lay the explanation of his extraordinary calm; all he did was to inquire whether he was armed. When Sebastiano replied that he was not, he took his own pistol from his pocket and gave it to him. It was only an *agent provocateur*'s pistol, of the kind that such gentlemen slip into the pockets of unarmed participators in riots and demonstrations, so that when arrested they can be charged with the illegal carrying of firearms; and it could only fire a single round: but it would be more than sufficient to prove Sebastiano's guilt. Perro, who was dropping with fatigue, gave Sebastiano one or two further instructions, then, throwing away his half-smoked cigar, went off to sleep in the servants' quarters.

12

Left alone, Sebastiano in his turn sat down at the foot of the bed and thought over the situation. What he now longed for was clearly impossible – to see Fausta, whose breathing he imagined he could hear in the next room, yet at the same time without her recognizing him or at any rate without his having to reveal the reason of his disguise. Thus thinking, he rose from the armchair and began to walk up and down. He put his eye to the keyhole of the door that led to her room, but could see nothing. Then he went to the window and, leaning out, was able to assure himself that Fausta's shutters were still closed. The window looked out to the east across one end of the villa, and the sun, which had now risen above the great box hedge, shone upon part of the open space in front of the house. A little farther away a

young gardener was raking the gravel with a monotonous, remote sound; from above it was possible to see exactly which part of the gravel had been raked and which had not. Sebastiano, after watching the gardener for a little, decided to remain at the window until the shutters of Fausta's window should open and Fausta herself appear. This seemed the only way of seeing her without being seen. Fausta, only half awake, would certainly not look at him, whereas he would be able to enjoy for a moment the charming sight of his beloved while she was still all relaxed and rumpled from her bed.

He waited a little while the gardener with his wooden rake methodically combed the gravel, still marked here and there by the wheels of motor-cars. At last the sound of an opening window made his heart beat wildly. A vigorous hand pushed out the shutters, flinging them wide open. Sebastiano, in his confused state of mind, had forgotten that a lady in Fausta's position does not get up to open her own window; it is her maid who lets in the light of morning upon her while she herself remains comfortably warm and drowsy in bed. And so when, holding his breath and with his heart in a tumult, he leaned forward a little to catch a glimpse of Fausta, it was quite a different face that met his eye.

It was the face of a young but atrociously ugly woman, a face resembling in every respect that of a Pekinese dog, with goggle eyes under a projecting brow, snub nose, wide red mouth shadowed with black down, and round, dark cheeks. So great was Sebastiano's astonishment that he could think of no way of hiding it except by wishing the ugly creature good morning. The staring eyes received his greeting with composure, as though it were quite the proper thing. 'Good morning,' she answered, and vanished. Sebastiano could not help saying to himself that here was a woman with whom he could do anything he wanted.

But what did he want? That was the problem. After spending nearly an hour trying to puzzle it out, wandering restlessly round the room and listening intently to the sounds next door, he went out, still undecided, into the gallery. Almost immediately Fausta's door opened as if by chance

and out came the snub-nosed maid. She was of middle height, but behind her coquettish little apron was a firm, vigorous, slim, well-proportioned figure which partly mitigated the unfortunate impression created by her face. Sebastiano went up to her and, with a spontaneity which surprised even himself, asked if he could do anything to help her.

'Ah, you're one of the new ones,' she said, smiling and displaying very white teeth, her dark cheeks furrowed by two curiously unattractive dimples. But she thanked him for his offer, explaining that her own particular jobs could not be done by a man. And yet, she said, to tell the truth, the Duchess would not at all mind seeing a handsome young man like him coming into her room instead of herself. Thus Sebastiano learned at the same moment not only that the Duchess Gorina was not impartial to good-looking menservants but also that the ugly maid liked him.

'I'm not a handsome young man,' he protested; but as he said these words there must have been such a charming look of shyness in his eyes that the ugly creature could not help smiling with pleasure.

'Oh, go on, you know quite well you are,' she said gaily. She was quite excited already; and those round, staring dog's-eyes of hers seemed now, instead of merely looking at, to be positively caressing the young man's face.

'And who is in there?' asked Sebastiano, affecting complete indifference as he pointed towards Fausta's door.

'No poaching allowed *there*,' she replied crudely. And she explained that General Arango's mistress-to-be lived there; there was nothing for him in *that* quarter. She said this with such virulence that Sebastiano trembled with instinctive jealousy. But he quickly consoled himself with the thought that, after all, it was both delightful and flattering to be the possessor of Fausta's favours without anyone suspecting it.

'Oh, well,' she said, half irresolute, half coy, 'I must go . . . See you later.'

But she did not move; and Sebastiano, knowing what was expected of him, without delay put his arm round her waist. She at once let herself fall against him with a gentle sigh of

happiness, her moist lips pressed convulsively, violently against his.

'Is that what you do with all the girls?' she asked a moment later when they had separated; and her unlovely eyes sparkled with an excitement so intense that Sebastiano suddenly felt his cheeks burning with shame. He realized, however, that she might be extremely useful to him later, when he wanted to take up his position in Fausta's bedroom.

'You *are* a good-looking boy,' she whispered to him meanwhile; and with a rough hand slowly and tremblingly caressed his face. 'What beautiful eyes you have ... My name is Giustina – what's yours?'

Sebastiano picked a name at random. 'Ricardo,' he said.

'Ricardito,' she repeated, caressingly, 'Ricardito,' and adding that she must go and take the Duchess her breakfast, she ran away.

In a few moments she reappeared, breathless, carrying a tray. 'Please,' she said hurriedly, 'will you take this to Her Excellency for me?' She went on to explain that she had to rush off to somebody else who had called her. But he must be careful, she said facetiously, not to go too near the mistress's bed; she was quite capable, if she liked the look of him, of making a grab at him and pulling him down beside her with her arms round his neck. That had been known to happen. With these words she ran off, leaving Sebastiano in great embarrassment.

It was the first time in his life that he had carried a tray, and he was terrified that some clumsy movement might cause him to drop the whole thing on the floor. The wide tray was spread with a little lace tablecloth, and on it were a coffee-pot and milk-jug, a butter-dish, a jam-pot, a cup and saucer, two egg-cups with eggs in them, and there was a great dome-shaped cover over the top: it was all made of heavy antique silver, with the Duchess's arms engraved on each piece. Holding the tray balanced on an unsteady hand, his eyes lowered, Sebastiano went to the Duchess's door and knocked. He immediately heard a shrill voice bidding him enter, in a sustained, ringing tone; and pushing open the door he went in, his eyes still fixed on the tray. When he

raised them he saw a room very like the one prepared for Tereso, except that there were a great many feminine garments scattered untidily about on the chairs. In the middle, in a vast bed whose canopy was adorned with an enormous carved and gilded coat-of-arms surmounted by a no less gorgeous golden coronet, sat the Duchess, propped on a pile of pillows. With her lofty crest of dyed hair, her little bleary eyes, her big red nose and her haughty mouth, she was looking even more than usual like a great parrot, frowning and full of a sort of crazy arrogance. Her figure, though small, was generously formed, and the foaming, lacy edges of her elaborate nightgown allowed a glimpse of a voluminous bosom, flabby, wrinkled, red, upon which hung a great cross of purple gems. From other lacy frills issued her thick freckled arms, reddish in colour, and having the appearance of meat that has been finely minced and tied up tightly in a fine, smooth membrane. Her hands, with their knots of bluish veins, their heavily-beringed fingers wide apart, were joined in front of her on the bed-clothes.

But the stately, absurd ugliness of the Duchess did not hold Sebastiano's embarrassed glance for more than a moment. For suddenly, with a sinking of the heart, he had seen, lying across the foot of the Duchess's bed, Fausta, wearing a light woollen dress that he knew well. He knew her at once from the back of her neck, narrow and delicate, where her short hair ended in a number of little pointed curls. Fausta, who had just finished dressing, had come to pay a morning visit to her protrectress, and at the moment when Sebastiano entered she was speaking of the imminent arrival of Tereso.

Sebastiano was violently agitated at the sight of the back of Fausta's neck, and he very nearly dropped the tray he was carrying. But Fausta, whose back was turned to him and who did not move, could not see him. The Duchess, on the other hand, had immediately turned her small, imperious eyes upon him and could see him very well indeed. Beneath her proud haughtiness of manner the Duchess concealed a great deal of good sense and a great deal of penetration – in everything, that is to say, except in affairs of the

heart, as is so often the case. She certainly did not consider herself beautiful; neither did she consider herself ugly: or rather, she did perhaps consider herself to be ugly and yet at the same time somehow seductive because of the youthful ardour of her senses, the importance of her position as a rich and titled woman, and her long and liberal experience of love. The facetious warning given to Sebastiano by Guistina was not merely the gibe of a jealous woman, for it was true that the Duchess now and then deigned to grant her favours to one or other of the most attractive of her menservants. She was so young in heart that she believed, or at least tried to believe, that these young men loved her for herself. She behaved towards them in every possible respect as a beautiful woman towards her lover; scenes of jealousy or coquettishness, affectations, rebuffs, flatteries, even tears – she spared them nothing. But afterwards she had enough sense to reward their long-suffering patience with extravagantly generous presents.

Neither Sebastiano's charm nor his obvious agitation now escaped the Duchess's notice. She immediately thought he was excited on her account; and she in her turn became conscious of the sharp sting of desire. So convinced was she of having completely captivated him that in her heart she cursed the presence of Fausta, for had it not been for her intrusion what might not have happened? The Duchess gazed at Sebastiano with a frown as overpowering as his own agitation, and then asked: 'You are one of the new footmen?'

'Yes, Your Excellency,' answered Sebastiano.

'Put down the tray on that table.'

'Yes, Your Excellency.'

'Not that one – what are you doing? On the wheeled table over there.'

'Yes, Your Excellency.'

'Now bring it here. . . . But you have to be told everything!'

'Yes, Your Excellency.'

'Can't you say anything except yes or no? . . . What is your name?'

'Ricardo, Your Excellency.'

'Ricardo. . . . Where were you before, Ricardo?'

'In an hotel, Your Excellency.'

'Pour out the coffee, then, Ricardo – half coffee and half milk.'

'Yes, Your Excellency.'

'But what are you doing? You've upset the coffee.'

'Just a drop, Your Excellency.'

'Just a drop! Just a hundred drops. . . . Are you engaged to be married, Ricardo?'

'No, Your Excellency.'

'Well, then, leave the maids alone. . . . Very well, you may go now, Ricardo.'

'Yes, Your Excellency.'

Sebastiano retired towards the door followed by the burning glances of the Duchess; but he had time to hear Fausta ask, as though resuming an interrupted conversation: 'But will it really be necessary for me to put lamp-black on my face?' – obviously referring to the fancy dress that she had chosen for the party that evening. Then he found himself outside the room again, in the gallery, with a tumult in his breast and his body damp with sweat under the hard, heavy livery.

13

Giustina was waiting for him in one of the window-recesses and at once asked him how he had got on. But Sebastiano was thinking of Fausta, and did not at first understand the question. Then Giustina, with a knowing laugh, told him that he looked completely bewildered – a sure sign that the Duchess had made a conquest of him. She did not seem at all convinced by the embarrassed account that Sebastiano hastened to give her as soon as he understood to whom she was alluding; and as at that moment the Duchess's bell rang again, she said, jealously, that she would go herself this time. She was absent only a few minutes; but when she returned, with the tray almost untouched, she informed

Sebastiano that he must have made a great impression on the old woman, since, apart from the fact that she had hardly touched her breakfast – a thing that happened very rarely – she had also asked a great many questions about him, showing clearly that she was annoyed at his not having come back again instead of her.

'Before two days are out she'll promote you to be her personal servant – and then you're for it,' concluded the maid.

Besides jealousy there was also a kind of envy in the tone with which she pronounced these words. Sebastiano could not help smiling when it occurred to him that he ought, of course, to regard it as another piece of good luck that the Duchess's amorous fancy should have fixed itself upon him.

Giustina angrily seized a broom and thrust it roughly into his hand, saying that in the meantime, until he became the Duchess's lover, he had better do some work; he had better come and help her sweep out and tidy up the Countess Sanchez's room. At this name all Sebastiano's agitation returned. Automatically he took the broom and followed her.

'How shockingly unfair this is!' thought Sebastiano, as Giustina moved about the bedroom; 'here am I for the first time in this room that I have longed for and dreamed about – and instead of kissing, one by one, these delicate garments that Fausta has worn on her lovely body, instead of burying my face in the pillow on which she has laid her cheek or in the sheets whose folds still preserve her precious warmth, instead of breathing at my ease the air already breathed by her, I have to stand by while all these delicious things are destroyed; while this rude servant-girl throws the clothes that Fausta has worn into a corner; while she tears the bed to pieces, and with it the impression that Fausta's limbs have left; while in place of this warm air, still perfumed and throbbing with Fausta's presence, she lets in the brutal, insipid freshness of the morning . . .' Sebastiano, with these thoughts in his mind, looked eagerly round the room, as though to fix carefully in his memory every detail of its beloved disorder. His gaze was drawn especially to the

hollow that Fausta's body had left in the tumbled bed: he longed to throw himself upon this sweet imprint and cover it with kisses.

Giustina put the broom and bucket in a corner and started to tidy the room. She was not envious, as a middle-class woman might have been; she was too familiar with the intimacies of her mistress's life not to feel that Fausta's luxuries were almost her own property; but her remarks were not without a certain unconscious cruelty which now and then made Sebastiano wince.

'Look at these dresses,' she said, pointing to the cupboard in which Fausta's innumerable garments were hung in a tightly-packed row; 'even she doesn't know how many she's got. But they cost her dear. She has to put up with old men's kisses in order to get them. . . . They say the General's quite old, too. Ugh! – I wouldn't have anything to do with old men, not even if they made me a Duchess.' Then she took one of the diaphanous pink garments that had been thrown on to a chair and handed it to Sebastiano, saying: 'Throw it on the floor; it's got to be washed.'

To Sebastiano it seemed a sin to cast into the dust this wisp of gauze that had embraced Fausta's naked body. At a moment when Giustina turned her back upon him he raised it to his lips and kissed it, breathing in its perfume. But Giustina was watching him in the wardrobe mirror.

'Ha,' she laughed scornfully, 'you like perfumes and women's clothes, do you? You're a pretty vicious one, it seems to me. . . . Smell it, smell it, my boy. *You'll* never get a chance of touching these clothes – except perhaps when they're being sent to the laundry.'

Sebastiano, who remembered that not many hours before he had fumbled with impatient fingers between these very folds of silk and the sweet, yielding flesh of his mistress, smiled at Giustina, almost grateful to her for her mistake; then he threw the garment into a corner.

Giustina was not content with tidying the room. She was also, as Sebastiano could see, indiscreet and a bit of a thief. Standing in front of the dressing-table, twisting her head conceitedly before the mirror with a scent-spray in her hand,

she covered herself with perfume. Then she took up something from amongst the bottles and boxes and slipped it into her pocket.

'Here, what are you taking?' Sebastiano could not help asking.

She showed him what it was – a lipstick. 'She must have about a hundred of them,' she said casually.

After the lipstick came an almost untouched box of exotic cigarettes which she insisted on Sebastiano's accepting, saying that the Countess would never miss them. Sebastiano, embarrassed, had to hide the cigarettes in his pocket.

Giustina's real reason in inviting Sebastiano to help her was simply in order to be alone with him – for she knew that Fausta would not come back to her room. She hoped he would embrace her and that after much coyness and resistance and many kisses he would finally push her on to that large, convenient and comfortable bed. But Sebastiano avoided her passionate glances and kept his head bent, feverishly dusting objects that had no need of being dusted and remaining as far away from her as possible. In the end, after tidying the dressing-table, Giustina lost all constraint and let herself drop, with a great sigh, flat on her back on the bed, her head on the pillow and her legs spread out, declaring that she felt tired and must have a little rest. The invitation was so obvious that Sebastiano shuddered. He was shocked at the idea of betraying Fausta, even from necessity, actually on her own bed. He sat down in the armchair at the foot of the bed and lit a cigarette.

'You come and lie down, too,' Giustina said brazenly. 'What are you doing there in that armchair?'

Sebastiano, with a little embarrassed cough, objected that the Countess might come in at any moment. And to avoid any more insistence on the subject he hurriedly proposed that they should meet after lunch in some other part of the villa, in Giustina's own room, for instance.

'How nervous you are,' said the girl contemptuously, rising from the bed. 'Anyhow, what did you think? I was only asking you to come and lie down. . . . After lunch I don't know if I shall be able to. . . .' She seemed highly

annoyed; and Sebastiano, to drive away her ill-humour, had to steel himself to beg for another of her long, honeyed kisses.

In order to avoid talking about this new love affair, which Giustina already seemed to regard as an established fact, Sebastiano started asking her questions about Fausta. Giustina, who had returned to her sweeping, told him, as she wielded the broom, that Fausta was beyond comparison the most beautiful of all the ladies staying in the villa at the moment.

'But she's bad,' added the maid, 'and a liar . . . If I were a man I certainly shouldn't trust her.'

Sebastiano asked her whether Fausta had any other lover besides the General. Giustina replied that there certainly must be another one, for she had proof, having found a man's linen handkerchief with the initials S.R. embroidered on it in her mistress's bag one morning. But who this lover might be, concluded Giustina, she had not been able to find out, though she had done her best to spy upon them. It was one of the other guests, no doubt. Sebastiano, who one night recently had lent Fausta his handkerchief, smiled with satisfaction. Of course she loved nobody but him. Giustina's words provided another proof of it – if indeed there was still any need of proof.

*

Sebastiano had not, like Perro, a confirmed habit of dissimulation; besides, during the last few weeks his hours of sleep had been short. At the present moment, as a result both of the nervous strain of playing a part and of the fatigue of many sleepless nights, he was conscious of a pleasant but irresistible torpor creeping over him. His eyelids closed as he stood talking to Giustina; and when he looked at Fausta's bed he was tempted by the sudden, impossible idea of throwing himself down on the coverlet and going to sleep. He seized the opportunity of Giustina's leaving the room for the purpose of fetching the vacuum-cleaner, and himself went out. From the gallery he went through the reception-rooms into the great hall. He tried to find the

panel that opened on to the service staircase, but however much he searched he could not discover it. So, keeping close against the wall and moving with the leisureliness and composure proper to menservants, he started going down the great wide steps of the main staircase.

He had descended the first flight in the silence of the still sleeping villa, and was just starting on the second when, from one of the reception-rooms, an imperious voice called out: 'I say . . . you there. . . .' He hoped that the order was intended for some other servant and went on downstairs. But the voice repeated: 'I say, you . . . are you deaf? Yes, you . . . I am speaking to you . . .'

Sebastiano did not know what a profound effect a livery can have on its wearer's behaviour. He tried to go on down the stairs as though he had not heard, but the livery pulled him back. 'Now I really *am* a footman,' he said to himself, amused; and he obeyed the voice.

Standing in the middle of the room beside a table was a young man dressed in riding-clothes who was impatiently beating with his whip against his yellow calf riding-boot.

'Will you please go . . .?' he began; but as he raised his eyes to Sebastiano an immense astonishment made him pause. 'Sebastiano! What on earth are you doing here?'

'Be quiet, for goodness' sake,' whispered Sebastiano, hastening forward.

The young man was a certain S., a wealthy landowner in the neighbourhood; Sebastiano had been out shooting with him less than a month before. He began hurriedly to explain that he was dressed up like this in order to – in order to— The other suddenly gave a wink and did not let him finish.

'Ah, I understand. . . . Women again, eh? But you're crazy, all the same. If that old witch of a Duchess got to know about it. . . . But, I say, you do look nice in your livery, you know.'

Sebastiano, relieved at the turn things had taken, confirmed his friend in his supposition – which was, after all, perfectly true – and begged him not to betray him. The other promised he would keep his mouth shut, swearing on his word of honour as a gentleman that he could be trusted.

'All the same, you're crazy,' he repeated, 'quite crazy.... Turn round, I want to see how your calves look.'

Sebastiano had to stand and be admired while the other man went into fits of ill-suppressed laughter. At last, after a final injunction to him to say nothing, and a renewed assurance from his friend that there was no cause for anxiety, Sebastiano was able to make his escape.

This time, however, he was determined not to run the risk of being given any more orders or of being recognized again. Sleep he must, and as soon as possible, otherwise he was afraid he might find himself dozing off in one of the great solemn armchairs that adorned the staircase landings. So, without bothering any more to behave like a trained servant he rushed headlong down the second flight and out into the park. He was afraid that if he went and rested in one of the small staff rooms in the basement he would be courting the possibility of an amorous visit from Giustina – not to mention Perro and Saverio and their accursed, abominable plot. He remembered that he and Fausta, during their nights of love-making, had often taken refuge in a sort of sham Alpine hut on the top of a little hill in a solitary corner of the park. That was just the hiding-place for him now, and he almost ran as he went towards it.

Leaving the drive he passed behind the box hedges and followed a narrow path, carpeted with dead leaves, which ran between the wood and the encircling wall. He passed the black, lily-starred waters of the artificial lake, the water-clock, the swans; he crossed the little bridge over the stream beside the tiny cascade; and came at last to the mossy steps and rustic balustrade that wound corkscrew-fashion through a thick grove of laurels and ilexes, round the little mountain. He started to walk up the steps, leaning on the balustrade. In the silence he could hear birds twittering and fluttering their wings in the undergrowth; and a pleasant damp, woody smell came to his nostrils, reminding him of the times he had mounted the steps at night with his arm round Fausta, eager to reach the top yet at the same time so impatient that he had to pause every now and then for a kiss or two. At the top of the steps, on the highest point, in a

clearing amongst the trees, was the little building. It was made of tree-trunks whose bark had been left untouched and which bristled with points where boughs had been sawn off, and was a careful imitation of a certain type of hut to be found in the Alps.

Sebastiano pushed open the door and went in. It was dark inside, except for the threads of light which crept in between the joints of the tree-trunks. But when the eyes grew accustomed to the gloom it could be seen that the hut was divided in two, half-way up to the roof, by a plank flooring which was approached by means of a wooden ladder leaning against it. Sebastiano thought how often he had mounted that ladder with his eyes on his mistress's garter and his nostrils entranced by her perfume, and was almost surprised to see that it was such an ordinary ladder, made merely of wood; on those wonderful nights it had seemed more splendid and dazzling than if it had been of gold or some other shining metal. He climbed now into the loft, gently drew up the ladder and laid it down on the planks. Up there, there was light and air from a number of little doors under the roof, through which a few pigeons which inhabited the trees on the hill came in at night to roost. But since Sebastiano had taken to coming there with Fausta the place had been closed to the pigeons, who had found one evening that their little doors had been stuffed up with newspapers. Sebastiano had cleaned the birds' droppings from the planks so that Fausta should not spoil her exquisite clothes, and had brought from home a camp mattress and a couple of cushions. The loft had thus become a regular bedroom. There was even a little collection of candles and matches in one corner.

Sebastiano now crept to the bed in the dark and lay down upon it with a sigh of satisfaction. But before settling himself down to his much-needed sleep he took the ball of newspaper from one of the little doors and looked out. Through the hole thus made he could see out over the tree-tops to the great sloping meadow and, beyond the meadow and one or two small hedges, could command a view of the swimming-pool, a long rectangle of green water sparkling gaily in the

sun, together with the red-tiled roof of its bathing-house and its shining nickel-plated diving-board. Small figures, red, blue, green, yellow, were moving about in the liquid golden sunlight round the white marble rim of the pool, figures of men and women in bathing-costumes. Now he saw one of the figures slowly climb the springboard ladder right to the highest platform, join its hands above its head, bend its knees and launch itself into space. There was a great spurt of water; and then another little figure climbed on the diving-board and raised its arms. 'That's Fausta,' thought Sebastiano, who was sure he had recognized her red bathing-costume. And then, head foremost, she plunged, and with her – into deep sleep – plunged Sebastiano.

14

The distant figure that Sebastiano had seen diving from the high springboard was indeed that of Fausta. As she came up from beneath the water, shaking her head and blowing through her nostrils, she saw an unusual commotion under the bathing-house veranda. All the bathers were hurriedly rising from the rubber cushions upon which they had been lying motionless and corpse-like in the sun; others who had been splashing in the water were clambering out on to the edges of the pool. The Duchess herself, her squat, plump figure swathed in some red, flowered material and a huge straw sugarloaf hat on her head, was in the act of rushing from the veranda. All this turmoil was caused by a little man in a smart, tight-fitting uniform of brownish green, who was advancing slowly, followed at a distance by other personages also in uniform, all of them taller than he, but looking as if they were trying to bend down and make themselves small as they walked so as not to insult him by their superior stature. He, on the other hand, strutted along with his chest thrown out, his uniform stretched tight over the hard muscles of his broad, square shoulders and of his short, bowed legs, which had a look of impatience about them as

though they longed to be astride a horse. His big head was close-cropped and bristling with grizzled hair, his cheeks so close-shaven that they looked as if they were bleeding; his forehead was large, round, and prominent, his nose small and hooked, like the beak of an owl. His face had a firm, hard look, like a profile on a medal – except for his eyebrows, which were of an extraordinary thickness and blackness and which he now wrinkled up in the September sunshine with an expression of great condescension and good-nature. He was wearing trousers with riding-straps and enormous silver spurs – a real little fighting-cock, thought Fausta as she looked at him; and one sleeve of his jacket, bearing the braid and stars of a general, hung empty from his shoulder.

It was Tereso. But instead of climbing out of the pool and running to make her bow to him all dripping with water like the other bathers, Fausta remained where she was. She had enough experience to know that given certain circumstances all men, whether generals or flunkeys, are much alike. She knew also that it was for her that Tereso had come. It was up to her, therefore, not to lose her head, but to pull in her hook with extreme caution, for the fish was too big to risk its getting away through carelessness on her part. 'Strut about like a peacock if you want to,' thought Fausta; 'I'm certainly not coming to meet you; it's you who must come and look for me.' This decision was the result of a plan which had been fully discussed by Fausta and the Duchess. They had come to the conclusion that Tereso, in spite of the power he wielded, in spite of his valour in war and his wisdom in peace, was, in love, a simpleton, far more innocent and defenceless than all the frivolous young men who were now advancing to meet him. Fausta knew that she must take full advantage of this ingenuousness. So she took one more look at the group formed by the General, his suite, and the bathers, and then, as if nothing had happened, struck out with energy and determination through the deserted waters of the swimming-pool.

The two women had not erred in their calculations. Tereso was not merely a simpleton where love is concerned but –

which is worse – refused to resign himself to that role; for he made the illogical but perfectly natural mistake of thinking that success ought to attend him in love as it had in all other spheres, and that to achieve this success he had merely to apply, in a slightly modified form, the methods that had brought him victory in the civil war. These methods consisted either of plain, carefully-calculated brutality, or of unscrupulous duplicity; but though they worked well with mobs and armies they proved too crude when applied to the more delicate encounters of love. Moreover, every time he tried them, Tereso was disappointed to find that he had again become involved in the same illusions, the same incorrect valuations, the same blunders that he had so often sworn to avoid. He had a profound and long-standing contempt for men of all sorts, a contempt which perhaps derived from his own secret but fundamental modesty; for he had conquered and subdued them all, without ever ceasing on that account to consider himself, in his own heart, a perfectly ordinary man. But he extended this contempt to women as well; and here he was guilty of a too hasty judgement, for at their hands he had never known anything but defeat. In all his life he had never found anything but venality and unfaithfulness in the women with whom he had had to do. The women who, when he was young and obscure, had deceived him with the most unworthy of his rivals, now, since he had become powerful, pursued him with sweetness and flattery to obtain his favours. With men he could tell at a glance what were their designs and ambitions; with regard to women, on the other hand – that is, until he had satisfied his desire and then thrown them aside – he always suffered under the most naïve illusions. When confronted by a woman who attracted him, Tereso became as inexpert as he had been at twenty; he was terrified of a rebuff; he was unable to conduct his wooing with that straightforwardness which in peace as in war had never failed to throw his adversaries into confusion; and he always imagined, at the slightest sign of virtuous behaviour on the part of the lady, that he was in love and that his love was returned. But these moments of exaltation were invariably

followed by the same disillusionment; and then he felt no wish to approach any but purchasable women, whom he could treat with perfectly safe contempt even before his desire was satisfied. Soon, however, the unsatisfactory quality of these casual affairs would drive him to make another bid for a less facile kind of love, with the result that he would be involved in more blunders and more disappointments. And so, between his attitude of contempt on the one hand and his naïveté on the other, he had arrived at the age of fifty in a state of frustration.

The same thing had happened with Fausta as with so many other women. Tereso knew perfectly well that she was mercenary and was merely serving her own ends in her relations with him; yet, though he despised her, he could not help falling madly in love with her, at the same time hoping vaguely that her notorious venality might perhaps, in his case, be put aside and that she might love him for himself. From the moment of his first advances he had realized that she intended to make use of him; but although her plan was quite obvious to him he was naïvely surprised and annoyed when he found himself experiencing all the feelings that she had set out to arouse by her artful evasiveness. Tereso, who often felt sceptical about his own power and fame – more from a wish to weigh their significance than from true humility – suddenly discovered, under the ordeal of his passion for Fausta, that he really believed in his own importance; it was almost as though the disappointment and vexation of unrequited love had at last furnished him with a touch-stone which the flattery of his followers and the admiration of the populace had denied him. 'So this is what I have come to,' he sometimes said to himself quite candidly; 'I am the most powerful man in the country. I have the applause of the crowd. I am at the height of my strength and glory. Yet a hussy with a few specious tricks causes me more anxiety than all the machinations of my enemies and of rival nations.' He did not realize that his political and military successes were a direct result of his unimpaired youthful faculty for self-delusion and infatuation, of that same violence of feeling which took his breath

away whenever he thought of Fausta's lips, of her eyes, of her body.

And now today Tereso, though always so self-controlled and calculating, had committed the initial error of allowing Fausta to see his impatience. He should not in fact have arrived at the villa until the evening, after attending some patriotic parade or other and the opening of a bridge at Antigua. Under the pretext of obviating any possible attempt at assassination, the whole of this programme had been put off until the following day. A prudent postponement of this kind was not unusual during the General's tours in the provinces. But this time there was no question of an attempt on his life; what had really happened was that Tereso had been unable to contain his impatience at the prospect of meeting Fausta.

As he advanced slowly, erect, his chest thrown out, acknowledging the bows of the Duchess and her guests with precise, stiff salutes, his heart was beating very fast beneath his tunic; and his eyes, half hidden under his thick eyebrows, were darting swiftly over the little crowd of people in search of Fausta. The dissimulation of feeling was so habitual with Tereso that even the Duchess though cunning as an old fox, was not sure of the exact significance of his facial expression. 'He is looking for Fausta, obviously,' she thought, 'but he is not showing all the impatience I should wish to see.'

Tereso was so worried at not seeing Fausta among the guests that he answered the Duchess rudely when, after making her curtsy, she hinted that she had been taken by surprise and that she certainly had not expected the honour of his presence so early, otherwise she would have made all preparations for receiving him in a worthy manner. Yes, he had arrived before the time appointed, Tereso replied dryly, and what was there strange about that? Perhaps she would like him to go back again, so as to give her time to make her preparations? His violent and unconcealed ill-humour did not particularly frighten the Duchess, but it provided her with the clue she was looking for. There could be no doubt that he was thus inordinately upset because he had failed to discern Fausta amongst the crowd of women that swarmed

about him – a sure sign that the fish was hooked and all that now remained was to pull in the line. But the old woman carefully refrained from calling Fausta, who went on calmly swimming about the pool.

When greetings and introductions were over, Tereso sat down in a wicker armchair in the shade of the veranda, crossing his legs and placing his cap on his knee. His mind was filled with disappointment and annoyance – disappointment at not having found Fausta as he had hoped, annoyance because, as always and in spite of the many lessons he had received, he had yielded to the urgency of his passion and, by his early arrival, had betrayed how important she was to him. Soon, tired of looking at the Duchess, who was pouring forth a flood of polite questions about his journey and his visit, he lowered his eyes to the pool, where each wavelet glittered with the reflected mid-day sun; and, as soon as he became accustomed to the glare he quite suddenly saw Fausta, whose beautiful brown arms rose and fell as they cleft the tumbled waters.

At the sight of her his whole body gave a start, like a horse suddenly shying at some unexpected object; but it would have been impossible to detect, in the dry and casual tone in which he asked the Duchess who it was swimming in the pool, how deeply the discovery had affected him. The old woman hastened to reply that it was Fausta, without adding title or surname – a little piece of cunning which made Tereso jump with surprise.

'Fausta who?' he asked, quickly recovering himself.

'The Countess Fausta Sanchez,' said the Duchess.

'The Countess doesn't seem particularly impatient to see me,' remarked Tereso gently, with a faint melancholy equally suitable to a disappointed lover or a sceptical but indulgent autocrat.

The Duchess, alarmed, started to explain that Fausta had no doubt been too deeply absorbed in her swimming to notice his arrival; otherwise she would certainly have hurried to welcome him. But if he liked, she added, with a tempting look in her eye, she could call her.

'Why?' said Tereso, brusquely, but without ill-humour.

'I came early on purpose, so as not to be bothered with ceremony. The Countess has done quite right not to worry about me: let her go on with her swimming.'

Tereso intended this remark to imply that it was not, as it might appear, out of impatience to see Fausta that he had arrived early. The Duchess, however, was not taken in .

In the meantime Fausta, who, as she swam, had followed this whole scene out of the corner of her eye, came up very slowly out of the pool. The bottom of the pool was an inclined plane which decreased in depth towards the end further from the diving-board. It was by slow degrees, therefore, that the lovely Fausta rose up out of the waters – first her brown boyish head and her magnificent bosom, whose curves, adorned with pearly drops, seemed to rebel against the tightness of the scanty bathing-dress; then her slim waist and narrow, straight sides like those of an adolescent; and finally her long, smooth, shapely legs. Slowly, beneath the frowning eyes of Tereso, she stepped out of the pool, shaking off the water from her. Standing on the marble rim, she pulled off her rubber cap with a fine indolent gesture and shook out her hair. Then, walking on the tips of her toes and gracefully moving her hips, she went to greet the General and the Duchess. Tereso had not missed a single one of her movements, and his heart was beating faster than ever.

He was hoping that after they had exchanged greetings the lovely creature would come and crouch on the floor at his feet, humbly and obsequiously. He was already preparing something to say to her, something that should begin with a slight reproof and end with a pardon. But Fausta, after a deep bow and a few flattering but entirely conventional words to which Tereso could not immediately find any reply, excused herself on the ground that she must dry herself and disappeared behind one of the doors of the bathing-house.

15

Other women, in the meantime – all those, in fact, who were present – had seated themselves on the floor round Tereso's feet, forming a graceful circle of young, scantily-clad figures with lovely curving backs browned by the sun and dark or golden heads. The Duchess took the opportunity of rising and going to look for Fausta. She did not find her in her dressing-room, but on the lawn behind the bathing-house. She was walking about slowly in the sun, smoking and looking at her nails, her feet bare on the cool mown grass; she was now wearing a dry costume. The Duchess anxiously observed that it was high time she made a pretence of some sort of interest in Tereso: actually she was afraid that Tereso, annoyed at Fausta's coldness, might leave them all in the lurch and go back to Antigua. The situation was already strained, she said, and disaster must be avoided. But Fausta shrugged her shoulders with indifference.

'He's going to be kept waiting for a bit, the ugly brute,' she said in her warm, harsh voice. 'Perhaps he thinks he has to do with another Carlota or Maruja?' – naming two of Tereso's recent easy conquests. 'If he's had enough already, he'd better go back to Antigua; he can get what he wants there for five *scudi*.'

'Yes, but I don't want him to,' said the Duchess; and she explained how she was afraid that there was some likelihood that the General really might go off to Antigua in a huff.

'Ah, you're afraid he'll spoil your party, are you?' said Fausta with a loud laugh. 'Don't worry. . . . I've got him at my mercy now. You can be quite sure he won't budge from here.'

But the Duchess still seemed so worried that Fausta had to promise that she would come in a moment without fail. The Duchess, reassured, returned to the swimming-pool.

Fausta walked about in the sun again for a little, smoking,

apparently in meditation but in reality thinking of nothing. Then she threw away her cigarette and strolled back in a leisurely, lazy fashion into the veranda. In one corner stood a little wheeled table laden with drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

Fausta had an idea. Taking hold of the handle she pushed the table towards the group of women squatting at Tereso's feet, asking in an obsequious, sing-song voice like a waiter's whether anybody wanted a drink or a sandwich. Tereso, who was bored by his circle of silly, fawning women, answered promptly that he was thirsty and longed for a drink. Tereso was an abstemious man, but he gulped down at one draught the extremely strong mixture that Fausta, still amusingly imitating the gestures of a barman, prepared and handed to him. Then, under the pretext of wanting to watch a young man, a very fine diver, who was at that moment standing on the highest springboard, Tereso rose from his armchair and the group of fawning women was scattered. The diver, who was short and muscular and wore a scanty bathing-slip that emphasized the powerful look of his body, raised his arms and bent his legs as it were to test their strength, then, taking a spring, hurled himself head foremost, neat and compact as a fish, piercing the surface of the water almost without a splash.

'Bravo! . . . good,' exclaimed Tereso loudly.

'A beautiful dive, wasn't it?' said Fausta, approaching with a glass in each hand.

Tereso turned and took the glass she held out to him. He raised it till it touched Fausta's glass and drank her health, looking her full in the eyes. After they had drunk they stood for a moment side by side without saying a word, looking at the pool. Suddenly Tereso had what he thought was a supremely brilliant idea for getting away alone with Fausta; actually it was no more than the ingenuous device of any amorous youth. He said he had heard so much about the park and was very curious to see it. But he did not want any guide except her.

Fausta was anxious to see how much more strain the situation would bear before it reached the breaking-point so dreaded by the Duchess. So after replying with a slight

bow that his request was a very flattering one, she said she was very sorry but at that moment was not in a position to grant it; she was soaking wet and by the time she had dried herself and dressed it would be lunch-time. The lie was a quite flagrant one, since not a single drop of water remained on the whole of Fausta's now perfectly dry body. After lunch, however, she added, she would have great pleasure in accompanying him round the park – although, to tell the truth, there was nothing much to see.

This time Tereso saw that she was merely trying to play with him, and the thing that the Duchess had been so afraid of happened. He decided all at once that he would leave. He would wash his hands of Fausta and go back to Antigua, where at least he would find the crowd ready to do him honour. Without a word he put down his glass on the table and went off with a determined air towards the gate. The officers of his suite ran up from all over the place and hurried after him, while the Duchess and her guests, realizing confusedly that something had happened, rose to their feet in surprise. But Fausta knew there was no question of her losing her hold over Tereso. She remained standing where she was, glass in hand, talking in an affable voice which became suddenly audible, all by itself, in the silence that followed Tereso's departure, to the diver who, up to his neck in the water, clung to the edge of the pool at her feet.

The distance between the pool and the red-painted iron gate was not more than thirty yards. In the space of those thirty yards a bitter conflict raged in Tereso's mind. He longed to abandon Fausta once and for all to her sterile, mercenary tricks, yet this longing made him unspeakably miserable; and, at the same time, he wished exactly the opposite. The prospect of having to spend the day amid the applause of enthusiastic crowds at Antigua, which at another time might have pleased him, now appeared inexpressibly gloomy. On the other hand, after walking away with such an air of determination, he could not possibly retrace his steps. His agony did not last long. When he was three yards from the gate he had a sudden inspiration and decided that he would neither go away nor turn back, but that,

under the pretext of business that had to be disposed of with his secretary, he would go and shut himself up in his own rooms at the villa. He turned towards the Duchess who, with a frightened expression on her face, was asking the secretary what had happened, and brusquely invited her to show him to his room. Then, advancing between two ranks of bowing bathers with his usual slow, firm, heavy step – the same step with which he walked when reviewing the ranks of his soldiers – and followed at a distance by the Duchess and the officers, he took his way towards the villa. 'Now I am going to keep *you* in suspense for a bit,' he thought angrily. 'We shall see who is the stronger.' It was thus that Tereso disguised to himself that, during those thirty yards between the pool and the gate, he had suffered a crushing initial defeat.

*

Alone in his room, having dismissed his suite and the dismayed Duchess, instead of examining the papers that the secretary had put ready for him on the desk, Tereso took off his tunic and cap, and in his white undervest, his left arm bare and the stump of the other protruding nakedly, started walking up and down the room in the shuttered twilight. 'What is the point,' he thought, 'of having vanquished all my enemies, of being the most powerful man in the country, of having defied twenty attempts on my life and won a hundred battles, of never having trembled or faltered in face of danger – if a stupid, mercenary slut, hardly even pretty (here he admitted to himself that he was being spiteful), a perfectly ordinary little strumpet, can keep me dangling like this at the mercy of her caprices? . . . But as soon as I've had what I want of her she's going to pay heavily for all these silly tricks. I'll teach her to make a fool of Tereso.' Thus the General reflected as he marched up and down the room. But even as he marched up and down, cursing Fausta and her mercenary coquetries, he could not help pricking up his ears in case a discreet knock might not be heard above the splashing of the fountain in the courtyard, and the sound of a beloved voice, warm and husky, craving admittance.

He was listening so intently that, in the midst of his own furious comings and goings, he clearly heard someone quietly enter the next room and shut the door. He knew, having been told by the Duchess herself as she accompanied him, that the room next door was Fausta's. 'But if she thinks I am going to knock at her door,' thought this fiery man, whose heart all at once began to beat twice as fast, 'if she thinks I am going to call her, she's wrong; oh, how wrong she is! . . .' And to give a semblance of reality to these stern decisions, Tereso sat down at the desk, opened the portfolio, and with a deep frown on his face started to go through the papers it contained. Every now and then, as he always did when his mind was deeply engrossed, he started gently scratching the swollen ridges on the stump of his missing arm with his one hand. He found the tickling sensation pleasant, and it seemed in some way to ease his nervous tension. But this time neither the industrious effort at concentration nor the tickling of the stump succeeded in distracting him from the thought that dominated his mind. The lines on the sheets of paper in front of him wriggled like snakes in the first warmth of spring, twisting themselves into knots and swaying up and down before his bemused eyes. His over-excited body was intimately conscious of the vibrations of Fausta's light footsteps in the next room, which stirred him with an effect more powerful and more profound than his own weighty affairs of state. She was moving to and fro and did not appear to be making more than an ordinary amount of noise, he thought. She was not humming, or dropping things, or sighing. In fact, she did not seem to be trying in any way to make her presence known or to attract his attention. The realization of this was very painful to him; at the same time it made him furious both at her triumphant self-possession and at his own incorrigible simplicity.

In the end, unable to endure it any longer, Tereso jumped up from the desk, went to the communicating door and raised his hand to knock. Then he suddenly became conscious of his own appearance in trousers and vest, his stump exposed, his arm and neck bare, and said to himself that it

would be more fitting to appear before Fausta in his general's tunic. With this intention he took the tunic from the chair upon which he had thrown it and contrived, with the aid of his one arm, to put it on. Tereso had a strong instinct for formal dignity, and this, apart from his ability to calculate his own advantage, was the only quality he possessed to act as a brake on his passions.

The mere act of putting on his tunic, however, had had the effect of cooling his mad impatience for a moment. 'What am I doing?' he asked himself. 'Am I starting to knock at women's doors like a vicious schoolboy in search of adventures? Am I forgetting who I am? Am I losing my head altogether?' He sat down again at the desk, calmly and methodically opened the portfolio which he had angrily closed when he had got up to knock at Fausta's door, separated the papers into various piles of unequal thickness and, taking up one of them, held it up to look at it. As he looked Tereso believed he had at last found the best solution of the problem of seeing Fausta without at the same time compromising his dignity. The document he was looking at concerned her brother; it was a request for the contract of a government monopoly. Tereso knew that Fausta's brother was a swindler, and that he was asking for the contract with the express purpose of enriching himself at the expense of the State. After a pretence of reading the document which he already knew by heart, he pressed the bell four times – the signal for his secretary.

'Contreras,' said Tereso as the secretary entered, without turning round or taking his eyes off the document, 'go to the Countess Sanchez's room next door and tell her that I will consent to see her about that affair of her brother's.' Tereso, in order to give greater verisimilitude to the pretence that he was very busy, had stuck a showy tortoiseshell-rimmed monocle, attached to his tunic by a ribbon, into his eye. His sight was excellent, and the monocle a piece of ordinary glass; but it was a sign to his subordinates that the matter in hand was of a really serious nature. The secretary clicked his heels and went out.

Tereso had sat down purposely with his back to the door.

As soon as Contreras had gone out he took a chair that stood in front of him and placed it beside him. On the chair he arranged his gloves, his cap and his whip. Then he took up the document and again pretended to examine it.

In less than two minutes the secretary presented himself again and said that the Countess Sanchez was outside and asked to be received. Tereso replied that she was to wait, and as soon as the secretary had again gone out he put his arm on the table, uncovered his wrist and began to follow the movement of the second-hand of his big gold wrist-watch. The hand went round with a hitherto unknown and quite agonizing slowness, but Tereso clenched his teeth and resisted the longing to call Contreras back again and tell him to show Fausta in. He decided to keep her waiting for ten minutes, though he considered that this was little enough and that a good half-hour would hardly have been too much. He knew that there is nothing like a long wait in an anteroom to induce awe and respect. But at the third minute he could not bear it any longer. He realized that it was not Fausta but he himself who was being kept waiting; and each tiny fragment of the watch-face, as his eye measured it, became identified with the weight of physical discomfort and feverish desire with which the passage of each second was burdened. He seemed to see Fausta's brown, boyish face mocking at him in the bright convex glass, while the busy, petulant hand of the watch went calmly round with little regular jerks across her smiling mouth. Then he could no longer see her face but only her figure from neck to waist, its curves besprinkled with pearly drops of water, the breasts firm and pointed under the tight silk of the bathing-costume – just as he had seen her at the pool; and the hand of the watch continued on its way, from one breast to the other, from throat to belly. Finally the complete Fausta, naked, remote, small, made him a mocking bow, throwing him a kiss with both hands as she retreated farther and farther into the shining convexity of the glass; and still the hand went round. It was now the fifty-eighth second of the fifth minute. Tereso, dazed and bewildered, shook his

head violently and then rang the bell. The secretary entered with his usual military salute and his usual click of the heels – so irritating at that particular moment. And then a moment later the secretary was discreetly retiring and Fausta was walking forward across the carpet.

16

Fausta had guessed at once what was hidden behind the pretext of her brother's petition: Tereso wanted to see her and had had recourse to this stratagem to save his own face. So while Tereso imagined he was misleading her, Fausta was simply amused. She came in wearing a black jacket and trousers, with a sky-blue handkerchief round her neck. The first thing she saw was Tereso's back, slightly stooping, and the sheet of paper he held in his hand. The shutters were closed and the room was filled with a subdued twilight.

'Ah, it's you,' said Tereso without turning round. 'Come in.' Now he could scarcely breathe, and he was so intensely excited that he had to put down the document on the table so as not to show how his hand was trembling.

After greeting him with all the signs of the most profound deference, Fausta replied that it was indeed she. The secretary, she said, had told her that he wished to speak about her brother; and she dared to hope that his request had at last been granted.

Tereso, furious with himself for feeling so agitated and at the same time so completely incapable of controlling his agitation, instinctively looked for some channel into which he could pour out his feelings of compressed rage. A few moments passed. Fausta, standing in front of him, made a pretence of casually looking at herself in the mirror of the cupboard opposite, putting up her hand to arrange the hair above her ear, while Tereso, burning from head to foot with intolerable excitement, his head lowered, fixed unseeing eyes on the document spread upon the table. Finally he looked up and said violently: 'Your brother is a swindler.'

Fausta, who had been expecting anything rather than this abuse, was struck dumb. But Tereso, who had spoken on the spur of the moment and had only by chance hit upon this particular outlet for his anger, did not even give her time to protest.

'Yes,' he went on, with a fury surprising even to himself, 'I called you here expressly to tell you that your brother is one of the most confirmed and shameless robbers that ever infested this country. You are asking me for a government contract for him. I am tempted to give him a contract once and for all for six feet by three of consecrated ground. . . . Yes, shot – that's what he ought to be – he and all those that behave as he does. Against a wall – against a wall, I say – once and for all – and then a common grave. . . .'

Tereso was now shouting like a lunatic, overcome with delight at having recovered the metallic voice, with its controlled range and carefully calculated effect, that he habitually used to terrify his subordinates. But after her first moment of alarm Fausta realized that he was making this scene entirely in order to conceal his true reason for sending for her and so as to strengthen his own position in her eyes. All at once she felt quite secure of her brother's request being granted.

'He's a swindler – I have the proof of it,' continued Tereso, and he started wildly rummaging amongst the papers, and took out a few sheets which he shook under Fausta's nose. 'A whole mountain of proofs. . . . He's a swindler – has been for years. . . . Look at this, there's not a single post that he's occupied in which he hasn't committed the most brazen robberies.' Tereso rose from his chair and started to walk up and down the room. 'It's a disgrace which cannot be allowed to go on any longer. This hard-working people – honest, poor, patriotic, devoted' – and in speaking thus Tereso, who came from the people, was genuinely moved – 'this people that has entrusted its fortunes into my hands with such absolute freedom and confidence must be protected from swindlers like your brother. They deserve something better. They have been asking for years for such robbers to be hounded out and punished, for justice to be

done. . . . Do you think I don't know? Do you think I don't know all about it? I know everything; and nobody can say that my patience is inexhaustible. . . . I love this people, from whom I came. I know the burdens and sufferings they have to bear in order to earn a meagre living. Before I became a general I was a peasant among peasants, a miner among miners, a workman among workmen. I know their splendid virtues, their simplicity of heart, their sobriety. The thought of there being swindlers like your brother who make fools of them, who take shameless advantage of them, providing themselves with a safeguard of patriot rhetoric by which this poor but great people is honestly deceived – this thought rouses me to indignation and cuts me to the heart. The time has come to put an end to all this. The time has come to make an example, to execute justice.'

Carried away by his own eloquence – which was, indeed, quite sincere – Tereso nevertheless began to feel that his first violent flush of indignation was gradually cooling. Not that he did not believe what he was saying; but he knew by experience that it was impossible, by the mere force of the law, to stop men swindling; that only conscience could make them honest; and that, on the other hand, the populace, with all its virtues, was capable of excesses far more harmful than the malversations of a few dishonest officials. A Manuele who steals, thought Tereso even as he went on shouting, may still be a clever and wise administrator provided he does not steal too much; but a populace that breaks loose fills the country with slaughter and ruin.

By this time, however – like a man who has gone up to a great height in a balloon and then loses control of it and does not know how to come back to earth – by this time Tereso began to see that it was going to be extremely difficult to descend from the airy heights of his indignation to the lower levels he had previously contemplated, that is, to the granting of Fausta's brother's request. Fausta herself had not failed to notice the growing embarrassment in Tereso's tone underneath his angry, threatening words. Realizing that unless she came to the rescue there was no knowing how much longer he would go on floundering between abuse

and threats, she promptly provided him with the excuse he was seeking.

She chose a moment when Tereso had paused, silent, between one shout and the next, and declared with sorrowful humility that she had never known of her brother's misdeeds; that, since he made this affirmation, there could be no doubt of its truth; and that, this being the case, she took it upon herself to withdraw the petition, since she would not wish to do anything for an unworthy person, even though it was her own brother. In the meantime, if the General permitted, she would like to leave the room. And she made as though to depart.

Tereso had made use of Manuele's petition in order to get Fausta into his room, but he had not foreseen that she would make use of this same petition in order yet again to evade his attentions. Now, however, there was no time to think out a new plan of action. He must act quickly, for she was already near the door. Forgetting all restraint he threw himself between the door and Fausta.

'What the devil is the matter?' he began confusedly. 'What is it? Wait a moment. . . .' And then recovering something of his usual commanding tone: 'Remember that you are in audience and that you cannot leave until I dismiss you.'

'That is true,' said Fausta penitently.

But this time, as if to make it clear that she had won the first round, she went, without speaking and without waiting to be invited, and sat down on the bed. Tereso meanwhile had started walking up and down the room again.

'What the devil —?' he began again. 'You needn't try to show greater solicitude for the fate of the country than I do. . . . What I told you about your brother is true – at least, if I can trust my police reports, which may possibly have been exaggerated. But it is also true – and this I have always known – that your brother has rendered signal services to the country and to my cause, and that he was one of my best officers at the time of the civil war. I know, in fact, both his bad and his good side. . . . Also, as I said before, there may be exaggerations or inaccuracies in the

police reports: one knows that the police lay on the colours rather thick. . . . Our officials, both low-grade and high-grade, and even those of the highest rank, are badly paid. It sometimes happens that they are tempted to take an interest in businesses or financial deals, and in return use is made of their political influence. They should not do it, but it's only human. . . . In fact,' concluded Tereso, stopping suddenly in front of Fausta, 'you needn't worry. Just this once more I'll give your brother the benefit of the doubt. He shall have his contract. . . . Are you pleased now?'

'Your Excellency is too kind,' said Fausta coldly, 'but if my brother is a swindler he ought not to have this contract. And if he is not, you ought to tear up the report which accuses him and punish the official who drew it up.'

'That is not possible,' said Tereso without hesitation.

'Then it is better for me to go away,' began Fausta. 'The Sanchez family has never allowed its honour — ' She did not finish the sentence and remained seated. She wished to see just how much Tereso would put up with from her. Such knowledge might come in useful for the future, she thought, on occasions when she might make other requests and put forward other claims.

But now again, as before at the swimming-pool, the situation reached breaking-point. Tereso suddenly understood what Fausta was aiming at, and he lost patience.

'The Sanchez family,' he said, with a very disagreeable, sarcastic laugh, 'the Sanchez family honour. . . . The Sanchez family,' concluded Tereso all at once in an awe-inspiring voice, 'is a family of robbers. I shall institute an inquiry and compel you to pay back everything you have stolen.'

'Now I've gone too far,' thought Fausta. And immediately, in self-defence, she took a handkerchief from the pocket of her jacket and began sobbing into it. And Tereso, when he had stopped shouting, realized that he also had gone too far. 'Another of these outbursts,' he thought unhappily, 'and I shall lose her for good.' He sat down on the bed near Fausta and, in quite a different voice, began imploring her not to weep, saying he would do all he could to please her. Fausta, as though she had not understood,

continued to sob into her handkerchief, but at the same time, languidly and as it were by accident, she put out one hand behind her and allowed Tereso to imprison it in his. She expected him to take advantage of the situation and kiss her. But she had not taken the General's shyness into account; all he did was to stroke her hand and go on telling her that she must not cry.

'I wasn't crying because I was hurt,' said Fausta, taking the handkerchief from her eyes and turning towards Tereso a face that was penitent but quite dry, 'but because I was frightened. I think you must have imagined that I was one of your soldiers. You scared me with your anger and with that voice of yours. You were terrifying. Feel how my heart is beating.' And taking Tereso's hand she guided it to the region of her ribs under her left breast. She intended this gesture to serve a double purpose – to flatter Tereso's vanity by making him think that he had been really terrifying, and at the same time to trouble his senses by a very intimate contact. And this time instinct was more powerful than diffidence. Tereso, with his arm round Fausta's soft, yielding waist, drew her to him and kissed her on the mouth.

But Fausta knew her Tereso. She knew that if she gave herself to him then and there, on that very bed, her brother would get nothing. Such cases of double-dealing on the part of Tereso were frequent, and were on everybody's lips. Nor was Fausta unaware that Tereso, though quite straightforward in all decisions regarding the exercise of authority, would do anything, even after that kiss, to avoid keeping his promise. So she pretended to be flustered to a quite unforeseen extent by this unforeseen and inescapable embrace and, as soon as they had separated, leapt to her feet, exclaiming that it was late and that she must go to the Duchess. Tereso also rose, disappointed, biting his lips, and asked when they would meet again. Fausta, assuming a vague, uncertain manner, answered that she did not know: the same day, perhaps, or perhaps the next day. She feigned the nervousness of a woman who has yielded to a passing weakness and then regrets it. And Tereso, who was anxious to kiss her again and made a move as though to put his arm

round her waist, found himself immediately rebuffed with a gesture of confusion and dismay.

'Forgive me,' said Fausta, seeing his face darken, 'but I feel quite upset. . . . This is the first time since my husband's death . . .'

It was such a preposterous lie that even Fausta herself, who had invented it on the spur of the moment for lack of anything better, had not the courage to continue; and Tereso felt all his former contempt rise and mingle with his desire, making it all at once bitter and distasteful. 'A woman like this,' he could not help thinking, as he looked at Fausta standing in front of the mirror very carefully re-doing the colour on her lips, 'should be thrown down on that bed, made use of, and then – just kicked out. . . . Instead of which I treat her with respect and even swallow lies of that magnitude.' But he had understood what was wanted of him; and, without looking at her again, he went and sat down at the desk, saying: 'What you really want is for your brother to get his contract. . . . Of course that's only fair.'

These words were intended by Tereso to convince Fausta, and himself too, that sentiment no longer entered into the matter; it was merely a question of a bargain, and the sheet of paper on the desk was the price; nothing else, neither love nor respect, counted. But his tone was sad rather than scornful, for he was really hurt by Fausta's coldness and even now was ready to deceive himself, if only she would give him the desired opportunity by some little caress or a rather less outrageous lie. Still troubled, he looked for a moment with unseeing eyes at the already drawn-up document which gave the desired contract to Fausta's brother. Then, suddenly making up his mind, he took a pen, dipped it in the ink, signed his name and handed the paper to Fausta, telling her that she must pass it to his secretary for registration. Fausta, who had watched the act of signature over his shoulder, hastily took the paper, folded it and thrust it into her coat pocket.

'Now you will be content,' said Tereso, looking at her with an expression of mingled bitterness and expectancy.

Fausta did not say yes or no; she merely answered that

she had never doubted his generosity. She knew that Tereso had set his heart upon her conquest, and she had already thought of an indirect method of fanning the flame of his desire and making it, if possible, even fiercer and more impatient.

'Have you a chimney here?' she inquired suddenly, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

'A chimney?' repeated Tereso in surprise, half turning to look round the room. 'No – that is, yes . . . but why?'

'Your chimney,' said Fausta airily, 'must certainly need cleaning; who can tell how much soot there is in it? So if a poor little chimney-sweep comes in here this evening with his brush and bucket and rags, don't send him away, and tell your officers not to send him away. He will come this evening after dinner before the party begins.'

'Ah! I see what you mean,' said Tereso, understanding at last, his whole face lighting up. 'A little chimney-sweep . . . well, he will be very welcome.'

'A poor little chimney-sweep,' repeated Fausta, with a radiant smile, and giving her hand to Tereso who could not refrain from kissing it devotedly, she went hastily out of the room.

*

From Tereso's room Fausta went straight to the Duchess's. She found her sitting in front of her toilet-table in a flowered dressing-gown, vehemently scolding Giustina, who was combing her hair, for not having been able to find any trace of Ricardo, the new footman who had brought in her breakfast that morning. Giustina, disentangling the Duchess's thick, black-tinted locks, was explaining how the young man had mysteriously vanished during the brief moment when she had gone to fetch the vacuum-cleaner. But the Duchess, abusing her like a pick-pocket, answered that she did not believe a single word of such an absurd story: a man does not vanish in that way like a cloud of smoke.

'And yet, Your Excellency,' said Giustina, who seemed amused at the discovery of her mistress's anxiety, 'we have looked for him all over the house.'

'But you know quite well where he is,' said the Duchess in a tone of deep suspicion.

To this Giustina, with the most terrible oaths, protested an ignorance as complete as the Duchess's.

Angry, jealous, alarmed, the Duchess, after a moment's silence, said that she did not believe her since she knew quite well that she had a habit of telling lies and swearing false oaths. She had better not start trying to hatch intrigues, said the Duchess; otherwise she would find herself thrown out, neck and crop, and her lover with her.

'Besides,' concluded the Duchess, quite incapable of controlling her crazy jealousy, 'besides, my poor girl, there's no use in your thinking that you, with your puppy-face, can be attractive to a young man like that. Yes – since perhaps no one has ever told you – you have a face just exactly like a dog's.'

This childish, angry frankness made Giustina smile, for she was convinced that she had made a conquest of Sebastiano and was not in the least sorry, considering the Duchess's passion, that he had disappeared. But the Duchess, who was watching her maid's face in the cheval-glass, saw the smile, and, all of a sudden, just at the moment when Fausta sat down beside her and told her in a low voice that she had obtained from Tereso the favour 'that she knew of' – all of a sudden the stout little woman leapt to her feet, upsetting a stool and everything on it, and planted two smart slaps on the girl's face. Giustina ran off sobbing, and the Duchess, panting, sat down again and immediately asked Fausta, in a hasty, agitated, vague manner, how her interview with Tereso had gone; adding, by way of excuse, that she must not take any notice, the maid was an insolent girl, and if she did not treat her like that there was no knowing what familiarities she might not take upon herself.

'It went extremely well,' said Fausta, who had observed the scene between the Duchess and her maid without any particular emotion. She described in a mischievous and lively manner her meeting with Tereso, laying special stress upon her own cleverness and the naïveté of the General. But the Duchess was not listening – or hardly; she was still pant-

ing and scarlet in the face, and held one hand pressed against her bosom to restrain its indignant heavings. Every now and then she turned towards the door, muttering words of scorn and casting furious glances; only at moments did she appear to remember that Fausta was speaking to her, and then, quite suddenly, she would give a little forced laugh of comprehension, or an agitated nod of approval. Her passion and jealousy had now reached a culminating point, and, between her rage at Giustina's smile and her anxiety at Sebastiano's disappearance, she was no longer capable of thinking or speaking to the purpose. In the end, however, she mustered enough self-control to say, with an air of mingled confusion and authority, that Fausta had done very well to get the paper signed before yielding to Tereso. With all his simplicity, she said, Tereso was cunning in his own way; and if Fausta had given herself to him her brother would have waited a very long time for his contract. Tereso was a man of the people, concluded the Duchess tartly, and one must never forget it; one knew what the lower classes were. The Duchess, thinking of Giustina and her handsome footman, twisted her mouth into a grimace of bitter disgust, like someone spitting. She seemed to have calmed down slightly, and, taking up a big silver bell from the dressing-table, she shook it violently several times. Giustina came in again, with eyes still tear-stained, and the Duchess ordered her to finish combing her hair – but without breathing a word or she would be instantly thrown out.

'Above all,' resumed the Duchess, who had by now regained her normal self-possession and was gazing at herself in the mirror, 'above all, remember you must flatter him: he's very vain.'

'As vain as a peacock,' said Fausta, and she described how she had taken Tereso's hand and placed it on her heart so as to make him feel how terrified she had been at his threats. 'And the best of it was,' she added with a laugh, 'my heart has never beaten with such absolute calmness as it did at that moment . . . but he didn't notice that; he was too much occupied with his own, which certainly *was* going pretty fast – just like an alarm-bell.'

The Duchess smiled at this. Her return to her usual serenity was encouraged by the thought that, after all, as long as Giustina remained in her room, she could not be with Sebastiano. She was so pleased at this simple idea that, with a rush of generosity as sudden and irresistible as her recent outburst of rage, she took a large box of powder from the dressing-table and gave it to Giustina, telling her to keep it: it would be very useful to her, she added – yielding to a last impulse of jealous spite – to brighten up that ugly black skin of hers a little. Then turning to Fausta, who was wandering about the room, she advised her with some severity not to be too pleased with herself, since everything still remained to be done and everything depended on how she behaved that evening. Fausta shrugged her shoulders and went out, saying she was going to the swimming-pool.

17

Apart from her love affairs with Sebastiano and Tereso, Fausta had found means of embarking on yet another affair, stranger and more novel than the first two. She was one of those women who like complete freedom of conduct and who, unable to achieve this ideal through virtue, seek it in a multiplication of intrigues and subterfuges. To her way of thinking, one love affair cancelled out another; and so, by juggling with several at a time, she succeeded in giving only the minutest fraction of herself to each of the many men who so crazily desired her. For this third intrigue, which she intended as a release from the other two, Fausta had not hesitated to select someone of the servant class. Doroteo – for that was his name – was a short, strongly-built youth with curly red hair and a profile a little like a goat, whose job was that of caddie at the golf course. Fausta had spoken to him first, and had been delighted at his unbelievably rough, crude way of speaking. Then one afternoon, while everyone in the villa was asleep, she had called him to go with her – for a little golf practice, she said; and the two of them

had gone off together over the hills and meadows. They had not come back till the evening. That day Fausta had at last experienced a genuinely new sensation – that of having to submit to a male assault for fear of being forcibly ravished or even murdered. Doroteo, who was just eighteen, had a cold, pitiless brutality which fascinated her. He was one of those who strike a blow looking straight into the eyes of their victim – the sort of person who, in the kitchen, is always given the job of wringing the chickens' necks or crushing the heads of half-dead birds. Between Sebastiano's devoted and delicate love on the one hand and Tereso's flattering attentions on the other, this red-haired, brutal Doroteo provided Fausta with an entirely new thrill.

With the same light step with which she had hurried from Tereso's room to the Duchess's, she now tripped down the staircase and across the courtyard to the great sloping meadow. It was late, and she almost ran. She had to find Doroteo at the hut where golf-clubs and other gear were kept and tell him of the change in the day's programme, for she had in the first place arranged to meet him that afternoon, and afterwards, having promised Tereso to show him the park, had had to run and put off the engagement. But now, having got what she wanted out of Tereso and made an appointment with him for the evening, she again felt the desire to spend the afternoon with Doroteo. On her way to find him Fausta's little feet, always swift upon the path of pleasure, sped far more rapidly than when they went to meet the true love of Sebastiano or the promises and gifts of Tereso. She ran down across the great grassy meadow, the sun now high above her, her chest thrown forward, her legs embarrassed by the steepness of the slope, her mouth half-open and panting for breath, excited by her own speed and by the thought of all her various intrigues. Not Doroteo but freedom seemed to be awaiting her at the end of her race – freedom from Sebastiano's love and from Tereso's attempts to bind her in chains with his favours.

At that hour Doroteo was always to be found in the little pavilion at the golf course, a round, hut-like building made of tree-trunks, with a conical thatched roof, copied from the

rude habitations of the natives of Australia. When she arrived, breathless with running, Fausta stopped for a moment at the door of the hut, pressing her hand against her breast, and then went in. Bare-armed and wearing a vest with horizontal red and blue stripes, a black scarf tied tightly round his waist, and a pair of blue cotton trousers, Doroteo was squatting in a corner, cutting with a knife at a forked stick of pine-wood. All round, against the rustic walls, were rows of leather bags containing golf-clubs. A big round table of rough wood occupied almost the whole of the hut. Doroteo's back was turned towards the door; at each stroke of the knife-blade the big, slightly soft muscles of his very white-skinned arms swelled and tightened. His head, with its copper-coloured curls, was bent to one side. Below his hair the skin of his neck and shoulders was all covered with freckles.

Fausta, though not in the least affected in her manner with Tereso or Sebastiano, was quite unable to talk to Doroteo except in an artificial, snobbish, over-refined tone of voice, interlarding her conversation with frivolous epithets and foreign expressions. Never for a moment, in fact, did she cease to be the Countess Sanchez, assuming all the pride, the capriciousness, the self-sufficiency that she considered suitable to her title and position. The whole significance of this intrigue with Doroteo was, indeed, based on their differences of rank which, instead of dividing them as usually happens, had for them been the main source of attraction. Always in search of new flavours, Fausta had found pleasure in the debasement of her quality as a fine lady; the greater the difference in rank the greater the thrill. If possible she would have liked to meet Doroteo at night when she was dressed in a low-necked gown, adorned with jewels, and all aglow with a sort of queenly dignity: the contrast with the boy's rough manners would have then been even more piquant. Though she was capable of riding for hours on end and was impervious to fatigue, with Doroteo she assumed the languors of a fragile and exquisite being; and she took pleasure in complaining, in her most shocked and affected tone, that he was a 'monster' and that he would certainly

be the death of her. In her relations with him she went so far as to invent for herself a new character, quite different from her true one, a character at once languishing, delicate, frivolous, sentimental, modest, and perpetually surprised and bewildered. She thought that Doroteo, in his boorishness, would despise all these qualities.

But Fausta was deceived in supposing that Doroteo was flattered by her favours, that he was like the slave to whom the queen secretly gives herself. She was, in fact, entirely wrong. This was not his first adventure with guests from the villa; two other ladies of rank had already preceded Fausta along the road which she imagined she walked alone. Hence Doroteo, with his modest intelligence, had come to believe that it was quite the normal thing for grand ladies to choose their lovers from amongst the servants – a curious thing, mysterious perhaps, but too convenient to worry about. Moreover, Fausta quite honestly believed that it was she who had chosen Doroteo for her lover; whereas it had been Doroteo, encouraged by the successes of former seasons, who had ogled and seduced her. And so, after all her intrigues, and at the very moment when she thought she had found her freedom, she was falling into an even more abject slavery.

She went up to him and, in a low and still rather breathless voice, asked him what he was making. Doroteo, without turning round, answered that she could see for herself – a catapult.

'A catapult? What for?' asked Fausta, already intimidated by his manner.

Doroteo replied in a sarcastic voice that he was making a catapult to go and fish in the river.

'In the river? I don't understand,' said Fausta.

'Yes, in the river,' answered the boy. 'To fish for fish in the river.'

'For fish?'

'Yes, for fish.'

He had now finished stripping the bark from the forked stick; he took up from the floor two long rubber straps joined by a small circle of leather and tied them to the two ends of

the stick. Then, in a contemptuous tone, he explained that catapults were used for shooting at birds in trees.

'Monster!' exclaimed Fausta: 'poor little birds . . .'

She would certainly not have spoken in this tone or used such words if one of the guests at the villa had shown her a double-barrelled gun and explained that it was used for killing thrushes and partridges. In any case she herself was a good shot.

Still without saying a word and as though determined to ignore Fausta's presence, Doroteo got up, went outside the hut and, picking up a stone, put it in his catapult. Fausta looked round just in time to see a pigeon, which was perched, cooing, on the edge of the roof, beat its wings and fall to the ground dead, its head broken and bloody. She gave a cry of horror and repeated again that Doroteo was a monster. Why had he killed that innocent little creature? Doroteo picked up the bird and threw it into a clump of shrubs; then replied that he had just wanted to try the catapult.

What chiefly embarrassed Fausta, however, was that Doroteo should be pretending to ignore her presence – his rustic way of showing ill-humour. She complained of this with an air of giving him a lesson in manners. But he answered roughly that he was busy and had no time to attend to her. Such were the relations of these lovers – which will seem strange only to those who think that love must be all sweetness. Doroteo behaved in this rude way because he believed that it was pleasing to the refined Fausta – in the same way that Fausta pretended to be refined because she thought that Doroteo despised refinement. Both were playing a part, each attributing to the other tastes which did not exist.

She loved to insult and provoke him. And when she saw him re-enter the hut and squat down again on the ground she said to him playfully that he was a boor: when a lady came in he ought to rise to his feet. Doroteo, intent on tightening the knots of his catapult, shrugged his shoulders and said that if she did not like him she was at liberty to go away: there were other caddies, anyhow. Fausta, to whom this contemptuous manner was sweeter than a caress, sighed that

he was a villain and that he offended her; then she came and stood behind him as he remained seated on the floor and thrust her long, thin fingers into his red curls. She liked his dirty, tangled hair, which looked like thick tow plastered with dust and salt. But Doroteo shook his head and told her to leave him alone as he had no time to waste. She was worried by this determined rudeness and asked him coyly why he treated his little Fausta in this way. He replied that she knew very well why. And there was an accent of genuine sincerity in his voice as he said this.

But Fausta insisted on knowing why he was angry with her. She liked to put herself in a position of inferiority with this boy; she apologized again for having put off their appointment for that afternoon, but this had been due, she explained, to that important person General Tereso, and although he bored her very much she had not been able to help it.

'No, no,' said Doroteo, testing the catapult, his head bent and one eye half-shut, 'that's not the trouble.'

Fausta replied in a vague, alarmed tone that she did not understand. Besides, she said, she had come to tell him that in spite of what she had previously said they could, after all, go out that afternoon on the hills for their usual practice. She would wait for him on the mound, in front of the Swiss hut, after lunch. That was all right, said Doroteo, and wished her a good appetite.

'And you must tell me then what is the matter,' said Fausta tenderly, poking her fingers into his hair again, 'you *must* tell me, you ruffian.' But when he threw back his head she saw in his glassy blue eyes a look of such sheer malevolence that she trembled and quickly released her hold.

'Go on, go away,' said Doroteo, returning to his catapult.

'Don't kill all those poor little birds, you monster,' repeated Fausta; and she went out of the hut on tiptoe.

18

Slowly, and with all the dignity she could muster, Fausta now took her way towards another point in the park where she knew that luncheon was to be served. Besides the Alpine hut in which Sebastiano was sleeping, besides the Australian cabin where Fausta had met Doroteo, there were in the park many other fantastic constructions – artificial grottoes, Swiss *châlets*, Chinese pagodas, classical ruins; and to these the Duchess's carefree guests betook themselves for meals on different days. Today the tables had been laid in a shell-lined cavern dripping with stalactites. Its entrance, like the entrance to a real cave, was through a narrow, irregular cleft; but inside, beneath a vault covered with incrustations and bats with wings made of velvet, in a coolness produced by rills of water gushing discreetly in the hollows of artificial rocks amongst moss and maidenhair ferns, hidden lamps diffused a greenish cavern-like light upon seven or eight sumptuously-arranged tables. The guests, their faces tinged with an emerald lustre, were all seated in their places; and Fausta, the last to arrive, was greeted with a joyful clamour. Smiling and eager, she went and sat down at the principal table, which was already occupied by the Duchess in her great conical straw hat, by Tereso in his tight-fitting uniform, and by Tereso's secretary.

Fausta had promised Tereso to conduct him round the park that afternoon; but afterwards, having obtained what she wanted from him, she imagined that he would be content with the appointment she had made with him for the evening and would disregard their former arrangement. She was therefore much annoyed when he reminded her of it. A new complication arose: how was she at the same time to accommodate both Tereso and Doroteo? This problem occupied Fausta's mind all through luncheon, while Tereso made laboured efforts at conversation, the Duchess supporting him with approbation and flattery and the secretary

eating steadily and in silence. What could she do to get rid of Tereso? For there could be no shadow of doubt in Fausta's mind: between Doroteo and Tereso it was Tereso whom she preferred to sacrifice – and this for three good reasons. The first was that Doroteo's ill-humour troubled her and she wanted to know the cause of it as soon as possible; the second, that she found his company, rude and boorish as he was, more attractive than that of the gallant Tereso; and the third, that if she wished to attach Tereso it was better not to make too many concessions. But it was also true that the situation was strained, as the Duchess had already intimated to her, and that she must be careful not to alienate Tereso altogether by showing him that having obtained the favour she desired she no longer had any use for him.

When luncheon was over all the guests left the grotto together, some going to rest, others dispersing about the park; and in a short time Fausta and Tereso were left alone. Fausta was quite unable to think of a way of getting rid of him. They were standing under a low pergola, from amongst the green leaves of which hung large, heavy bunches of black grapes, and Fausta, while talking, now and then picked a single grape and put it into the General's mouth. Tereso, on his side, was in a confidential mood. He still thought that Fausta had a mercenary object in her relations with him; but owing to his usual fatal sentimentality this thought did not in any way modify his feelings, and he felt himself drawn towards this beautiful woman with tender, if misguided, abandonment. No matter what Fausta really was, for him, at that moment, she was the woman he loved, the woman who loved him. Thus Tereso's ingenuous nature triumphed once again over his long experience of human worth. But this time, contrary to his usual habit, he did not mind – in fact he asked nothing more than to be allowed to deceive himself.

Tereso was in a state of mingled exaltation and melancholy. He reflected that he had saved the nation from civil war and that he was the most powerful man in the country and one of the most powerful in the world. Yet, in spite of

that, here he was at the feet of a worthless woman. He was thinking, too, of the emptiness and sterility of everything – of power as well as of love. And yet both of these things were so sweet, so irresistible. Such thoughts embellished, in his own eyes, the image that he made of himself. And, carried away by his love of Fausta, he wanted her to see him in the same light. He began to tell her, after much laborious preamble, that she must not look at him as the head of the State but simply as a man.

'Ah, yes,' said Fausta, intent on gathering a grape from a bunch that hung higher than the rest.

Tereso, whose political utterances were always of a concrete nature, instinctively attempted the same concreteness of expression in his declarations of love. He wanted Fausta to love him as, for twenty years, the crowds had loved him. All at once he remembered the wave of indignation against the criminals, the wave of fanatical love for himself, that the rare attempts on his life had never failed to awaken among the populace. On those occasions he had felt himself truly close to the heart of the people, and those had been the best moments of his long career – moments when he had been conscious of being newly confirmed, by the affection of the entire nation, in the benevolence of his ideas and of his government. It seemed to him that the same thing ought to happen in the case of Fausta. It seemed to him that in her too, the news of the danger that he was facing for love of her, of the plot that he was defying in order to see her, ought to release a gush of love and of gratitude. In making these calculations, he failed to see that there was not the same distance between himself and Fausta as between himself and the populace, which perceived him only from afar, surrounded with glory; and he forgot that, in order to acquaint Fausta with the danger that threatened him and so affect her emotions as he wished, he was not able to employ the expert pens of countless journalists but only his own single human voice.

While Fausta, her face and arms raised to the vines above her, continued to pick the big, sun-warmed grapes, Tereso therefore began to tell her that she did not know

how much he had already done for her sake. In an absent-minded way she asked him what he meant. She thought Tereso wished to speak to her again about her brother's contract.

'I am exposing myself to a conspiracy on your account,' said Tereso, suddenly swelling with anger at the very thought of it; 'here, in this very house, there are people who are plotting an attempt on my life. They want to kill me, to destroy my work . . .'

He expected, at these words, to see her stop her grape-picking and open her eyes wide with terror; but Fausta, who had scarcely been listening and imagined that he was revealing mere suspicions, simply asked in an indifferent tone how that could be possible, since he was so much loved.

'Oh, yes, I am loved,' replied Tereso bitterly, already disappointed by her lack of interest, 'but that does not prevent some blind fanatic, imbecile, or criminal from taking it into his head to make an attempt on my life.'

He went on to say that this would prove to her how his power, though so bitterly envied and coveted, though so brilliant and so glorious, was in reality beset with dangers and continually haunted by treachery and death. But, he said, he had performed this act of rash courage joyfully because he was conscious of doing it out of love for her. Besides, he felt exaltation rather than fear at the idea of danger; he preferred to go and face it in the open rather than fly from it like a coward. He was still that same Tereso who, at the battle of Escalona, alone and with one arm torn by a jagged shell-splinter, had led the famous cavalry charge that had given him victory.

'People think I have grown old,' concluded the General, 'but they shall see.' Tereso, as he said this, was transfigured. His sincere and still unsatisfied yearning for greatness filled him with emotion. It seemed to him that he was truly in love with Fausta, and it pleased him to place his life in jeopardy for her sake. At the same time his breast swelled with a savage tumult at the thought of having to fight once more, once more to defy danger – at the thought, indeed,

that he was still the courageous, unsubdued Tereso of twenty years before.

Tereso expected that this harangue would have the effect he had calculated upon Fausta, but he soon saw how mistaken he was. Fausta's first feeling at hearing him insist in this way upon the imminence and reality of the danger that threatened him was not, as he had hoped, one of grateful affection towards him for facing the danger for her sake, but simply one of fear. It was not a very urgent or violent fear, it is true, for Fausta was no coward; but it was a quite genuine fear of being involved in Tereso's fate and killed at his side. All at once she stopped picking grapes and asked, in an unexpectedly anxious voice, why Tereso, knowing all this, remained one moment longer at the villa. He replied, simply, that he remained because of his love for her. Besides, he added, with swift disappointment at seeing Fausta make a grimace as though she did not much appreciate the regard shown for her – besides, the police had exactly identified the conspirators, and they would be arrested and taken away before they had the chance of putting their plan into execution. Nobody in the villa would notice anything – not even she; there was no need for her to worry, for she was in no danger. Fausta, when he said this, saw that she ought in some way to try and mitigate the bad impression that her own selfish solicitude had evidently made upon Tereso, so she quickly went on to say that since she saw he had no fear she was not afraid either. She concluded gaily that it might even add a spice of variety to the party – which otherwise would be extremely boring.

But her tone was cold; and as she spoke Tereso felt the enthusiasm and emotion of a few minutes before gradually evaporating. He saw that he had failed to kindle in the heart of a woman the love he had so often excited in the hearts of multitudes. But at this point Fausta had an inspiration which revived Tereso's already half-extinguished illusion.

'I want to remain beside you,' she said suddenly, 'as much as I can. Instead of having dinner with all the others this evening, why shouldn't we dine alone, just the two of us, in your room? In that way,' she concluded with her

loveliest smile, 'if the attempt comes off we shall die together.'

These words had a pleasant sound in the ear of the General, and his feelings were again stirred. He was touched, and would have liked to ask Fausta if it were really true that she loved him enough to be willing to die with him. But his usual shyness would allow him only to thank her and to bend down and kiss her hand.

'I will come in my fancy dress,' added Fausta. 'Do you remember? The poor little chimney-sweep with his brush and pail . . .'

Tereso answered that he would await the chimney-sweep with impatience. He had completely forgotten the coldness of Fausta's previous words and was now deceiving himself afresh over this hopeless and improbable love affair.

Fausta, however, in spite of Tereso's disclosure of the conspiracy, in spite, too, of his proffered love, had not given up her plan of spending the rest of the day with Doroteo. She had made the suggestion of dining together not, as Tereso supposed, out of a sudden access of affection, but in order that she might be able, without too much difficulty, to disengage herself for the afternoon. At the very moment, therefore, when Tereso's heart was blossoming anew with the craziest of hopes, Fausta, who considered she had already made too many concessions, was preparing to drown those hopes in a fresh flood of bitterness. Of course, she went on after a moment, in a casual manner, if they were to meet in the evening so much earlier than arranged it would be better to put off their walk round the park till the next day. She must go and sleep for at least a couple of hours, for she still felt tired, she said, after the reception of the night before. And then she must also try on her costume.

These words, notwithstanding the light, casual tone in which they were uttered, chilled Tereso. He had counted upon the walk in the park as a certainty and, just at the moment of Fausta's retracting her promise, had been on the point of suggesting that they should start at once. 'It is obvious,' he thought, 'that this woman is laughing at me.' And at this thought all his love was turned to hate. For a

moment he was tempted to tell her what he thought of her and, having finally shamed her, to wash his hands of her altogether. But there had been an odd, faint tone of embarrassment in Fausta's voice as she was excusing herself from her engagement. Tereso thought that it would perhaps be more profitable to have her watched; and in the evening, with the proofs in his possession, to take a just and well-planned revenge. The proofs of what? Tereso did not know, but, with a flair sharpened by thirty years of public life, he could smell an odour of deceit and treachery in the air. No sign of these reflections appeared in his face. He too, he said quickly, as though remembering something, had some business to transact with his secretary that ought not to be postponed. They would meet in the evening, then. Fausta, well pleased at having solved the problem of the afternoon without either sacrificing Doroteo or arousing the General's suspicions, assented with genuine enthusiasm. Then taking leave of Tereso with a smile and a slight, confidential pressure of the fingers, she went off hurriedly in the autumn sunshine, beneath the grape-hung pergola.

When she had gone Tereso felt a further uncertainty. Was it possible, he asked himself, that that sweet smile, that sweet caress, were false? But the graceful figure of Fausta, erect in the golden sunlight, was receding farther and farther under the green sprays and dark grape-clusters of the pergola; and now, if ever, was the time to discover whether she was lying. He called his secretary, who was waiting near by, and ordered him to have Fausta shadowed during the whole afternoon. In taking these precautions he still flattered himself that they were superfluous and that Fausta had really gone to rest as she had said.

*

When she came out of the pergola Fausta gradually quickened her step until by the time she was in the middle of the meadow she was actually running. She was conscious of an approaching storm, and she rushed to meet it with a feeling of almost sensual pleasure that frightened her a little. She could foresee that she and Doroteo would come to blows

that day. What else, after all, had she expected when she gave herself to this boy? 'I shall end up by being murdered,' she thought with conviction as she began, panting, to climb the steps that led to the hut, 'murdered by some tough like Doroteo – that's how I shall end up. But it's stronger than I am . . .'

She expected to meet Doroteo inside the hut. Instead, she found him lying on the ground outside, flat on his back, his arms behind his head, his eyes fixed on the sky and a blade of grass between his teeth. She hovered round him in hesitating silence for a moment, then called him by name, telling him to get up as she was ready. But Doroteo did not move. She knelt down beside him and, putting her hand in his hair, shook him. At last he turned his eyes towards her and, still without moving, announced in a drawling voice that he did not want to come with her that day; he wanted to stay where he was and sleep for a couple of hours, and she could do what she liked. This tone of cool detachment was something entirely new on the part of Doroteo, whose sensuality, beneath his rough manners, was always easily aroused; and Fausta, frowning and tenderly calling him a 'brute', asked him what he meant by all this strange behaviour. Doroteo's only reply was to tell her to let him sleep in peace.

'Well, tell me what has happened, then,' said Fausta.

Doroteo, still looking with eyes half-closed at the sky, promptly asked her what she was doing in the park the evening before, near the pool where the swans were. Up till now he had never been jealous, because he foolishly believed that when women gave themselves to him it meant that they did not love anyone else. But the sight of Fausta and Sebastiano, the previous evening, embracing on a bench in the park, had made him feel the sting of jealousy for the first time in his life. Now Fausta was certainly no stranger to this kind of accusation on the part of her lovers, but with Doroteo she realized that there would be neither use nor advantage in telling a lie – a thing she never felt with Tereso or Sebastiano. She liked Doroteo for his brutality; to lie to him would imply a desire to avoid the delicious violence which

she both feared and longed for. She replied, therefore, with the insolent, calculated coldness of a high-born lady, that she did not have to account to him for her actions; that if he really wished to know there was no reason why she should not tell him: the man she had been with was her lover.

At these words Doroteo leapt to his feet, seized Fausta by the arms and started forcing her backwards into the hut. There, pressing her back with her shoulders against the wall, he commanded her to repeat what she had just said. In the darkness of the hut Fausta could not see his face, but, conscious of the fury that expressed itself in the grip of his powerful hands on her arms, she was both attracted and afraid. Nevertheless, she found strength to give a contemptuous, insulting laugh, and to reply that she did not intend to repeat anything and that if he was deaf she, for her part, would not waste her breath.

'Oh, so I'm deaf, am I?' said Doroteo and, blind with rage, struck her a violent blow across the cheek, insisting breathlessly that she should repeat what she had said.

Fausta, dazed by the blow, stared at him open-mouthed; and then Doroteo struck her again, on the other cheek this time. But, even though bewildered and hurt, Fausta was all the time coldly wondering whether she should go on provoking Doroteo, for, in spite of the terror it inspired in her, she felt an irresistible desire to foment his violence with fresh insults. She was only afraid lest he might black her eye with his fist, or break one of her teeth; otherwise she did not shrink from his blows. She admitted to herself that her relations with Doroteo had hitherto been merely a necessary preliminary to this outburst, and all at once she saw that its dangers were worth facing.

Accordingly, as soon as she could regain her breath, and with Doroteo still gripping her arms, she poured forth a flood of insulting abuse interspersed with screams of contemptuous, forced laughter.

'Perhaps you thought I was in love with you, did you? But after all you're only a caddie. . . . Perhaps you were forgetting that? Just a servant, among a pack of other servants. . . . A mere menial, do you understand? And really I have

no obligation at all to be faithful to anyone of your sort. I was just amusing myself with you . . . and I shall go on amusing myself. But when I get tired of you I shall dismiss you, like the menial that you are . . . and if you make a fuss I shall get the Duchess to give you the sack, to throw you out like a dog. I shall say that you were wanting in respect. I shall have you beaten like a slave . . .'

Fausta screamed these words at him in as cutting and cruel a voice as she could, all the time studying Doroteo's fixed, stony expression, which she could distinguish quite well now that her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness of the hut. When she felt she had abused him to her satisfaction she began to struggle, crying out to him to let her go as she had had enough of him. She calculated that, coupled with her insults, the wild, strenuous movements with which she now strove to break away from him would infuriate Doroteo till he finally and completely lost his temper. She knew that there is nothing like violence to attract violence; and she was not mistaken. All of a sudden Doroteo's face appeared to undergo a kind of painful, frenzied contraction; and Fausta, before she realized what was happening, found herself seized, crushed, jostled, smothered with blows. She took care to protect her face with her arm; but otherwise she abandoned herself completely to this delicious violation. Finally they fell together on to a pile of hay in one corner of the hut. There, in the darkness, blows quickly turned to rough caresses, cries to sighs, fury to desire, and hate to love.

Outside the hut, Tereso's agent, who had watched the scene with an attentive eye, saw that he now had more than enough material for the report he had to draw up, and went off in the direction of the villa.

19

But another person besides the agent had been a witness, though an involuntary one, of the quarrel between Fausta and Doroteo – Sebastiano. Awakened suddenly by the harsh, scornful voice of Fausta as she railed at the youth, Sebastiano thought for a moment that he was still dreaming of the voice of his mistress, as those who are in love sometimes do; though the angry tone and harsh words had nothing of the subdued, vague quality suitable to dreams. Then, after an interval of silence, the voice began again; and he was forced to recognize that he was no longer asleep and that it was really Fausta who was speaking. Sebastiano was so overcome with horror that for a moment he was not aware of any pain; but in reality – as sometimes after a very bad fall – the pain was there, but was so deep-seated that all sensation was numbed. Breathless, with a horrible sinking of the heart, he sat up and listened, leaning against the wall, his eyes wide open in the darkness. The voice was now insistent, and the abuse, violent, vulgar, cruel, came thick and fast, leaving no doubt of its absolute, full-blown reality. Like a dying man who, mortally wounded, can barely muster the strength to drag himself to a stream and expires before he is able to wet his lips, Sebastiano threw himself face downwards on the floor and was just able, through a crack between two of the planks, to watch what was happening below. He watched the pair whilst they were quarrelling, whilst Doroteo was slapping those cheeks that he himself had so often caressed with a trembling hand, and then whilst he was pushing Fausta towards the pile of hay; then they fell together outside his range of vision and he remained where he was, face downwards, his eye glued to the crack through which he could no longer see anything, his cheek pressed against the rough wood, his whole body chilled, exhausted, inert. But, from the pile of hay, sounds came to him whose meaning was only too painfully clear;

and then Sebastiano wished he might lose his senses altogether and neither see nor hear any more. It was not jealousy that he felt, but rather the sense of an appalling catastrophe that was beyond tears or cries; and, hidden inside this dim feeling like a needle in a ball of wool, he could feel every now and then the sharp stab of an agonizing thought: 'Fausta is there, just underneath me . . . with another man . . . Fausta is betraying me . . .'

Sebastiano could not have told how long he remained lying on the planks of the floor. The silences which alternated with the sighs and murmurs of the pair on the pile of hay beneath sometimes almost made him hope he had been dreaming; but then a voice, a sound of creaking, told him that he was wrong. At last they were quite quiet and still; and then Sebastiano tried to forget his pain by thinking of something else; but the pain, perforce, had an irresistible attraction for him, and just when he thought to have succeeded in thrusting it from his mind, back it came again, in the train of the most unlikely reflections. Every argument, every subject that his mind touched upon led, by unforeseen paths, to Fausta; everything was transformed into her image, everything bore her reflection, everything became converted into a symbol of her. Sebastiano did not know that it was possible to suffer so much; and the quality of his pain and the continuance of its cause precluded the possibility of any relief from an impatience so agonizing.

At last he heard Fausta and Doroteo leave the hut, and their voices grew fainter and fainter in the distance and were lost in the silence of the park. Then, without using the ladder, he leapt down from the loft and went out. He saw that the light of day was already dimmed, and the sky streaked with trailing clouds, red from the setting sun. Almost eight hours had passed, between the time he had slept and the time spent in his hateful vigil.

He did not know what to do or what to think. Stunned and miserable, it seemed to him that not only all life, but each separate moment of it, had lost all aim and reason. He was very hungry; and this aggravated his misery, for it was a sign of continued life and vigour notwithstanding the

mortal anguish that oppressed his heart. With these confused thoughts in his mind he descended the little hill, skirted the lake – in which everything, water, swans, and water-clock, was now deep in shadow – passed through a thicket of magnolias and came out into the great meadow. It was now the moment of sunset. The whole sky seemed to be converging towards the west, in a vast drift of long, trailing clouds darkly fringed with red; and against their movement the villa, as it looked down across the meadow, appeared black, squat, and square, like a stationary mass in the middle of a stream. Sebastiano, as he looked at the evening sky and at the clouds moving with the wind, felt a sudden desire to sing. But, when he started stammering out the words of a popular song that had been in fashion some years before, the sound stuck in his throat and he began weeping. The clouds were travelling in the opposite direction to the one in which he was going; and he kept his eyes turned towards the heavens, faltering out the foolish, bitter words of the song as he ran, weeping, across the meadow. Now and then he stumbled in the thick grass, and then the sound of his voice swelled to an even more plaintive lament; now and then he remembered he was hungry, and his tears flowed faster.

When he came near the swimming-pool he felt he must find something to eat and went into the bathing-house. The pool was deserted; the yellowish water had a thick, tepid look like the water of a pond; underneath the diving board floated an enormous, tightly-inflated green-and-white india-rubber frog. Sebastiano went straight to the bar and found what he was looking for – a plate of sandwiches wrapped in a napkin. But as he ate he continued to weep, and his pain grew so much sharper that all at once, after the second mouthful, he found he was no longer hungry. Leaving the half-eaten sandwich on the bar-counter, he went out and started towards the villa.

Sebastiano had an exact knowledge of every part of the park, of every seat and shrubbery and nook, from having frequented it at night with Fausta. But now, in the gathering darkness, through the veil of tears that dimmed his

sight, all these places, though perfectly intact and undamaged, had, in his eyes, a look of sinister devastation. The ghost of Fausta seemed still to hover about them, sullied with the dark, livid colours of treachery; and it was worse than if she were dead. Sebastiano, fumbling absent-mindedly in his pocket, came across her handkerchief which he had picked up that morning, and, obeying a sudden impulse, hurled it away into a clump of bushes.

This gesture brought him back to reality – or at least to a consideration of how he must behave; and for the first time the voice of self-respect, hitherto silent, made itself heard through his grief. His tears dried quickly and he began to think of what was to be done. It was true that he had a prompt and safe means of revenge at hand; he had merely to return home and allow the plot to take its course. If he did this Fausta would be punished without his intervention, meeting the end she deserved in the arms of Tereso. For a moment it seemed to Sebastiano that there was something providential in this neat chain of circumstances and that it only remained for him to accept the vengeance that chance offered him. Then, thinking it over, it appeared to him that the best kind of vengeance would be, on the contrary, to save Fausta, as he had already planned. By doing so he would be able to show her, after the plot had been frustrated, that he was capable of rising superior both to her and to her treachery, proving to her at the same time his own conscious magnanimity and his final resolution to have nothing more to do with her. In pursuance of this train of thought Sebastiano's imagination dallied for some minutes with the various possibilities that suggested themselves – whether to save Fausta's life and then tell her of it and take leave of her; or to save her and then take leave of her without telling her he had saved her; or again, to save her and then neither say anything nor even see her, but vanish out of her life for ever.

Sebastiano, whose innate delicacy of mind always ultimately prevailed, would have liked to adopt the last of these three courses, but he realized that for reasons which were, so to speak, technical, he must choose the second. He felt that

having once set foot upon the path of generosity he ought to have gone the whole way. But in that case Fausta would not have been punished, nor would she ever know why he had left her. Sebastiano was still in too emotional a state to see that this last resolution was not dictated, as he believed, by offended pride, but by love pure and simple, by a love that was stronger than any disillusionment or any betrayal, that could find its satisfaction in sacrifice and silence, and that was not concerned with revenge, even of the kind that wears a mask of disdainful magnanimity or high-toned forgiveness.

It was quite dark when he reached the villa. He went by the servants' entrance into the basement, where he found preparations for dinner already in full swing. Footmen were running hither and thither, orders were being shouted, bells were ringing, and from the kitchen came a clatter of dishes and pots and pans. Sebastiano had only one desire now – to get it over as quickly as possible with Fausta and then escape to his own home. He saw now that his first, complicated plan to save her before Tereso laid hands on her, at the same time without either denouncing his half-brother or allowing the plot to be put into execution, was no longer feasible. So he decided to do nothing beyond warning her of the danger she was in and, apart from that, to leave Tereso, Saverio and Perro to their fate. If the attempt were successful, so much the worse for Tereso; if it were unsuccessful, so much the worse for Perro and Saverio. Sebastiano, who had always been indifferent to political affairs, had now, since his recent disillusionment, lost interest in human affairs too. It seemed to him that human beings were a mass of corruption and imbecility; that human destinies were controlled by chance alone; and that, between the wickedness and folly of humanity on the one hand and the frantic absurdity of chance on the other, there was only one thing to be hoped for – the early destruction of the entire human race. At that moment he had a feeling of real and positive disgust for every creature that walked upright and wore clothes. And more than once, in that basement corridor, as he watched the footmen scurrying busily about, he was surprised to find

himself thinking that if all went well they at any rate would soon be wiped off the face of the earth by Saverio's and Perro's infernal machine.

Sebastiano looked for the service staircase that led to the upper floors. But after wandering for some time through the low-ceilinged passages he found he had forgotten where it was. He was on the point of stopping one of the menservants and asking him when, as he passed in front of a half-closed door, he distinctly heard the voice of Saverio. He pushed open the door and went in.

In the middle of the room, which was low and very large, was a big rectangular table covered with a red felt cloth. Round this table a number of women in white aprons were vigorously wielding hot irons, pressing trousers and other garments belonging to the Duchess's guests; others sat sewing; yet others were polishing shoes, holding them up under the light of three great green-shaded lamps that hung from the vaulted ceiling. The numerous wires from the electric irons and the steam rising from the garments as they were pressed gave the room the appearance of a sort of domestic laboratory. They were all women in the room, and the air was heavy with the kind of smell that hangs about a copying-office or a tailor's workshop. All women, that is, except one solitary man standing at the far end near an area window, cleaning a pair of black dancing-shoes. The man was Saverio.

Saverio had vowed to himself, on entering the villa, that he would behave like a proper conspirator – like Perro, in fact, who never made a superfluous movement nor spoke a word too much. However, what with the enthusiasm which seethed in his heart and the ideas which whirled in his brain, he had soon forgotten his good intentions. He had begun by talking to the girl at the indicator-board; then he had started conversations with any of the menservants who had come within range; finally, in pursuit of the indicator-girl, he had plunged into this room. Any crowd is tempting to a propagandist, even if it be only a collection of housemaids and kitchen-maids. And so Saverio, at first more or less in jest and then more and more in earnest, had let himself go, and

had started to hold forth in front of all these women as though he were addressing a gathering of well-informed and already convinced comrades.

He told them, as he carefully polished the dancing-shoe, that they were oppressed, that they were the servants of other women exactly like themselves, that in the new social order there would no longer be either masters or servants. The women, vigorously handling their irons, laughed at him and did not appear to take him seriously.

'What good will it do me if there are no more masters and mistresses?' suddenly remarked a young woman with a round, massive face and a big bosom; 'what I want is to become a mistress myself.'

Saverio replied that that was not possible; the time of masters and mistresses was coming to an end; and then everyone would have the advantage of the things that were now enjoyed by a restricted and privileged class.

'Rubbish!' exclaimed a thin, faded woman, in a distrustful voice; 'there will always be masters and mistresses – and we shall always have to slave for them.'

But an old woman who was busy sewing, all huddled up on a stool, and who, at each stroke of her needle, wrinkled up her face like one of the Three Fates, suddenly burst out fiercely: 'Keep your ideas to yourself. We don't want any trouble. You ugly fool, don't you know that the police arrest people who talk like that? If they put us in prison you certainly won't be able to get us out with *your* silly chatter . . .'

Saverio, in the manner of the pedantic agitator, answered that if they were all arrested, so much the better, for the cause had need of martyrs and victims.

This reply, straight from the revolutionary handbook, was received with a chorus of protests. 'Go to prison yourself,' 'Idiot,' 'Blackguard,' 'If you don't stop, we'll report you,' and other similar remarks, were hurled at him from all sides. One woman, for lack of any more effective missile, threw at him the horsehair-stuffed holder with which she was grasping her iron. All the others immediately followed her example, and the poor wretch was deluged with a hail of iron-holders.

He protected his face as best he could with his arm and still went on shouting that they were just blind slaves, that he was trying to save them and this was the way they treated him. In the end, as the missiles came ever thicker and more accurate, he ran right round the table and arrived beside Sebastiano, who had been watching this scene from the doorway. 'You hags,' screamed Saverio.

But the butler, who was passing along the corridor at that moment, hearing the din, put his face in at the door and demanded, with a scowl, to know what was happening. There was an immediate silence, in which suddenly was heard the caustic voice of the old woman who had already abused Saverio.

'He's a shameless one,' she cried, turning a fierce face towards the wretched Saverio. 'He came in here with the excuse of helping to clean the shoes, but all he's done is to put his hands on the girls. If he was even good-looking – but he looks like a toad.'

This accusation was received with screams of laughter from the younger women, and with indignant protests from Saverio, who saw himself suddenly degraded from the rank of political agitator to that of a servants' hall Don Juan. But the butler silenced the tumult with a gesture and, bidding the women get on with their work, sternly ordered Saverio to take the shoes up to their owner.

'That'll teach you to leave the girls alone,' the old woman shouted after him. She had evidently enjoyed the scene.

The younger women started to sing a song in chorus; and Saverio and Sebastiano went off towards the service staircase.

'There's nothing to be done with servants,' panted Saverio as they climbed the narrow, winding stair. He went on to explain that amongst servants, unlike peasants and workmen, class consciousness was completely lacking. Servants, he added, were in a position very like that of intellectuals – that is, they were attached to, and parasites of, the *bourgeois* class. There was, in fact, nothing much to be expected either from a poet or a lackey – from the former because art is always profoundly reactionary and conservative, from the

latter because to serve is to betray. But in a revolution some use can be made of intellectuals to do the work of propaganda; whereas servants are not merely useless but actually harmful and must therefore be ruthlessly liquidated. In revolutions it is the servant class that, by committing atrocities and taking infamous reprisals upon its former masters, brings dishonour to the cause it claims to be fighting for. From its ranks may come executioners, but never apostles. This was Saverio's way of avenging himself for the iron-holders with which the girls had pelted him in the room below.

Sebastiano listened absent-mindedly to Saverio's outbursts. After his first agony of grief, after the later promptings of self-respect, he now felt quite calm and apathetic; his decision to save Fausta's life had become little more than a matter of duty. This calm, it is true, was ruffled now and then by memories of the past and by recollections of recent rebuffs, which made him tremble with indignation; but he was easily able to subdue these onslaughts of his old passionate spirit. 'I had only that one illusion left,' he concluded by thinking, as he came out behind Saverio into the Gallery of Busts, 'the illusion about love; and now I have lost that too. Now the boredom will be complete.' He felt he had aged by twenty years in the space of a few hours.

20

In the gallery Perro came forward to meet them. He was dog-tired, and the consummate actor's ceremonious calm was almost played out. Although he was certain that the organization of the plot left nothing to be desired, he still could not help being afraid of a possible hitch, and then his career as an *agent provocateur* would be ruined. He asked Sebastiano in a peremptory manner where the devil he had been hiding all day, to which Sebastiano, gloomy and indifferent, gave the perfectly truthful reply that he had been asleep.

'Asleep?' repeated Perro, opening his eyes wide.

'Yes, asleep,' repeated Sebastiano dryly without looking at him.

Perro saw that he was not lying and was once again astonished at a self-control which surpassed even his own. 'Either he's a halfwit – which he does not seem to be . . . or he's a police-agent, which is not possible . . . or he's the most ruthless, hardened terrorist I have ever met in my life,' he thought. To be able to sleep within an hour of the assassination . . . Perro was amazed and, looking at Sebastiano's sad but tranquil countenance, could not believe his own eyes.

This dialogue took place in the gallery, beneath the forbidding faces of the Spanish Conquistadors, while from every direction came insistent sounds of the Duchess's impatient guests ringing their bells. Perro announced that the decisive moment was at hand. In a short time the Countess Sanchez would be going to dinner in Tereso's room, and the bathroom would be empty. Then Saverio would carry up the tray with the bomb upon it. Meanwhile he himself would take up his position in one of the window-recesses in the gallery. Sebastiano, to be ready for anything that might occur, was to hide in the adjoining room – which was Fausta's. Perro wanted to suggest an excuse to Sebastiano to enable him to get into this room; but Sebastiano cut him short, saying, in a joyless tone, that there was no need to worry about an excuse as he had already, that morning, found means of ingratiating himself with the maid. Perro was again astonished. He was counting on having Sebastiano arrested at his appointed post with the pistol in his possession, and Saverio at the moment when he was placing the bomb. Caught in the act, they would be handcuffed and carried straight off, bodily, to the car that was waiting at the park gate. Nobody would notice anything, not even Tereso, who would receive his report much later, when all was over.

Finally, after a few more explanations, Saverio and Perro went off to fetch the bomb which Perro had previously concealed, and Sebastiano was left alone in the gallery. He had been waiting impatiently to go and warn Fausta before she

went to the General's room, and was on the point of knocking at her door when that of the Duchess was half opened and the face of the Duchess appeared, wearing an expression of mingled imperiousness and embarrassment. She beckoned to him and in a low voice called him by name: 'Ricardo'.

Sebastiano was so distracted by his own troubles and plans that he did not notice the Duchess's embarrassment nor her subdued, confidential tone. But the moment he was inside her room he realized his mistake. The Duchess, whose short, corpulent figure was clothed in an under-garment of pink shot-silk stretched to bursting point over her massive, flaccid sides, had already taken up her position in front of a great cheval-glass, whose three mirrors reflected, as though in some grotesque triptych, three different images – full-face and two profiles – of her squat, ill-formed person. Stretching a languid arm towards Sebastiano she ordered him to help her dress, saying that for some reason or other her maid had quite vanished. But the Duchess's face was suffused with a red, fiery glow right to the tip of her prominent nose, and wore an expression of visible excitement beneath its usual exalted arrogance, showing very clearly not only the truth of the pretext but also the nature of the feelings that had led her to summon Sebastiano.

For a moment he felt inclined to burst out laughing. It was thus, he thought, that Fate wished to cure him once and for all of the sweet illusion of love, first revealing Fausta's treachery and then adding jest to injury by presenting him with a flamboyant, repulsive caricature of amorous passion, the Duchess's senile infatuation. But there was no time to be lost even in wondering at the ironical lessons of Fate. With the same mechanical resoluteness with which that same morning he had brought himself to put his arm round Giustina's waist, Sebastiano now went up behind the old woman and repeated the gesture. He then remained motionless, his arm and his whole body dragged to one side by the weight of his massive burden, his eyes fixed sadly and dreamily on the mirror which reflected with painful exactness the image of the two interlaced figures.

The Duchess, who had not hoped to be understood quite so promptly, grew even more purple in the face – if that were possible – but did not blink an eyelid. All she did was to move one plump, ring-laden hand to her side and grasp Sebastiano's hand tightly, at the same time asking him in a slow, confused way whether she should dress up as a *vivandière* or as a gipsy: which would he advise? She added that the gipsy fancy dress was certainly very becoming to her type, but that the *vivandière* costume, on the other hand, was much prettier and more youthful. Besides, with so many dark women, there would certainly be a great number of gipsies at the party; whereas very few would think of dressing up as *vivandières*. As she said these things, in a voice that with every syllable seemed about to succumb beneath the weight of its own excitement, the Duchess continued to look at herself with a stern expression in the cheval-glass, which was crudely illuminated by three unshaded lamps. And with her hand she grasped the inert fingers of the so-called Ricardo more tightly than ever.

The Duchess's question had suddenly reminded Sebastiano that, no more than two days before, Fausta had expressed similar doubts, asking him in the same far-away, meditative voice and with the same dreamy expression whether she should dress up as a pierrot or a chimney-sweep. He had advised the latter as being more suitable to her brown boyish face. 'Some day,' he could not help saying to himself, 'Fausta, old and ugly like this woman here, will also fall into the arms of some footman or other; and she too will fondly imagine that the passing years have made no difference.' This thought saddened him, for he still had in his heart a grateful admiration for Fausta's beauty; and it took away all bitterness and all desire to laugh at the Duchess. So instead of answering with some expression of veiled sarcasm, as he was at first tempted to do, he took his arm from the Duchess's waist and replied kindly, with the sort of indulgence shown towards the whims of a child, that he himself really did not know much about it, but that perhaps, on the whole, the *vivandière* costume was to be preferred.

'Yes, I agree,' said the Duchess, delighted. 'It is so much prettier. I shall have a flowered dress, a big hat with a feather, and a little cask at my side. I shall put some good wine into the cask and I shall go round saying: "Who wants some wine?"'

The Duchess was so pleased with this prospect that she did not notice that, after a certain moment, she was speaking to herself. When she did notice it she was quite frightened. Who was this handsome footman and why was he continually disappearing in this way? The Duchess, who had been expecting a renewal of Sebastiano's embrace, instinctively crossed herself in a most devout manner.

*

Sebastiano went straight from the Duchess's room to Fausta's and entered it without knocking. All the lamps were lit, and there was a warm, pink glow. Fausta, sitting entirely nude on the edge of the bed, was stretching out her smooth, well-shaped leg towards Giustina who, kneeling on one knee, was preparing to slip a rolled-up stocking over the small foot. Fausta, seen from behind, was so lovely and of so pure a form, with her long bare back slightly curved, her neat head bent to one side above her shapely neck, her rounded brown arms stretched forward, that for a moment Sebastiano felt himself completely in love with her again. Then the two women gave a scream and jumped to their feet, terrified; and Sebastiano once more thought of nothing except saving Fausta's life.

'Don't scream,' he said urgently. 'I have simply come to tell you that you are in danger. Get away from the villa while there is still time.'

The more bewildered of the two was now Giustina, who was smitten with profound amazement at seeing the footman who had made advances to her speaking with such familiarity to her mistress. But Fausta, who had immediately recognized Sebastiano, was struggling, with violent, wilful movements, to put on a dressing-gown, at the same time in an irritated voice telling him to go away.

'I shall not go,' said Sebastiano, 'unless you come with

me.' His tone was firm, and he avoided looking at Fausta for fear of falling under her fascination again.

'But what is the danger?' said Fausta, annoyed, and speaking in a low voice. 'It's you who must get out. . . . Are you crazy? Get out before they find you here.'

Sebastiano knew Fausta well enough to see that his abrupt entrance had made her completely furious. Those frowning eyebrows, that sombre brow, that trembling voice, were indicative of nothing but fear, selfishness, hatred. Of love there was none behind that angry mask – nor indeed had there ever been. This realization brought a great relief to Sebastiano and took away all hesitation. He leapt towards her and seized her by the arm.

'Don't be a fool,' he said with stubborn insistence. 'If you won't come I shall force you to come.' And, so saying, he drew from his pocket the revolver that Perro had given him.

Fausta realized that Sebastiano was in earnest. She had suddenly perceived that the danger to which he was alluding was the plot of which Tereso had already told her. But the General's assurances made her sceptical of the imminence and the reality of the danger, and with feminine mistrust she saw in Sebastiano's intervention merely the act of a jealous lover. There could be no doubt of it; he was making a last attempt to prevent her going to Tereso. All at once a plan took shape in her mind and she decided to put it into effect immediately.

With a sudden change of tone she said to the young man that it was all right, she would do as he wished, but at least he must give her time to dress. In the meantime he had better go and wait for her in the park, by the main entrance. She would dress and in five minutes, or ten at the most, would be with him. Fausta, ignorant of Sebastiano's new feeling about her, thought it necessary to add a touch of flattery to her lying words; so she explained that she was asking him to go entirely for his own good because somebody might come in at any moment and discover him. These propositions were accompanied by a caress of the hand on Sebastiano's sulky face. He had not the courage to turn away his cheek from the fingers he had once loved so dearly.

Sebastiano hesitated whether he should accept her suggestion or not, and Fausta tried to overcome this hesitation by an appearance of haste and efficiency. 'Go on – go on – hurry up,' she said, pushing him towards the door. And turning to the maid: 'Quick, Giustina, my black silk dress.'

But this haste had an effect contrary to her expectation. Sebastiano, becoming suspicious, stopped at the door and said he would prefer to wait there, inside the room. He would have liked to add sarcastically that Fausta certainly need not claim to be shy in front of him, but he modestly restrained himself. His tone was again firm and cold, and Fausta saw that she must find some new method of persuasion.

'You don't trust me . . . all right,' she said, still in the same hurried manner. 'Well then, instead of waiting for me in the park, wait outside in the gallery. If you still don't trust me, here is the key. Take it – and now go.' She took the key from the lock, thrust it into Sebastiano's hand, and pushed him outside. This time he did not resist, and went out into the gallery.

When Sebastiano had gone Fausta still maintained her feverish haste, but for a purpose quite different from the one she had professed.

'Quick, Giustina,' she said, 'put on the black dress yourself.' And, before the astonished maid had time to draw breath, Fausta was taking off her apron and unbuttoning her dress. And while Giustina, all bashful in her ugly white cotton undergarment, stood covering her half-bare breast with her arm, Fausta explained that she was to go and meet Sebastiano in her place. They were both of the same height, and if she hid her face with a mask and drew a shawl over her head he would never notice the difference. She must leave the house with the young man by a side door and lead him as far away as possible, wearing her mask all the time and taking care not to give away the trick. She could, indeed, keep up the pretence as long as she liked, not taking off her mask at all and allowing the young man to make love to her and kiss her. These last words made Giustina start, for in spite of her recent disillusionment she still preserved all her partiality for Sebastiano.

But Fausta thought that her start of surprise was due to modesty. 'You silly,' she said, 'when will you ever find such a handsome young man again? Don't worry, and have some fun while you can. If you're worrying on my account, you needn't be afraid. I pass him on to you with pleasure – body and soul.'

Fausta, pleased with her intrigue, was laughing now, showing her sharp white teeth; and meanwhile she was moving eagerly round the embarrassed Giustina, putting the last touches to her disguise.

'You *must* keep your face covered,' she said, adjusting the little black silk mask on Giustina's snub nose, 'not only because he mustn't see who you really are but also because you've got such an ugly mug that you'd frighten him, poor boy. But not your chest; you've got a well-formed one, like mine, so let him see a little bit of it and he'll be all the more willing to follow you.'

When she had finished dressing Giustina, Fausta clapped her hands with delight at seeing her standing so erect and stiff in her low-necked gown – almost intimidated, as it were, by her own splendour. With a sudden generous impulse she took from a box an old necklace of lapis lazuli and gold and placed it round her neck, saying she would trust her with it, and the disguise would be all the more complete. The necklace had been a present from Sebastiano; it had belonged to his mother and had been the sole object that he had been able to save from the wreck of his inheritance. Fausta, however, gave no thought to the added pain she would be inflicting upon him; she was all taken up with her inventions. She liked the idea of making Giustina a present of Sebastiano and his love – just as she sometimes made her a present of cast-off clothes. She liked to imagine Sebastiano's surprise when, after many kisses and declarations of love, he finally took off the mask and discovered that he was holding not Fausta but this hideous monster in his arms. She liked the idea of disencumbering herself of Sebastiano's passion once and for all by means of this low comedy trick.

Finally she muffled up Giustina in a magnificent cashmere

shawl and, advising her once more not to be silly but to make the most of her opportunity, pushed her out of the room.

21

Tereso, in the meantime, had had the report of the spy he had sent to watch Fausta. The report, in spite of its bureaucratic dryness, omitted no detail: Fausta and Doroteo, the slaps, the blows, the final embrace – nothing was lacking. It appeared to Tereso as he read it that the whole world was growing dark before his eyes, and he instantly felt a savage desire to rush into the adjoining room and kill Fausta with his own hands. But this seemed too feeble a revenge, and, swallowing his anger, he started to pace up and down the room. He heaped the most atrocious insults upon the head of Fausta, and one after the other rejected as being too gentle the various methods of avenging himself that his indignant imagination suggested. To kill her was a small thing, he argued: she must go on living so that she might suffer and so that he might gloat over her suffering. He thought of having her disfigured in some unsightly manner by one of his hired thugs, so that her beauty would be ruined; or of shutting her up as a madwoman in an asylum; or, again, of confiscating all her property and sending her to ply the trade she was born for in a brothel. Tereso, since he had risen to power, had never used that power for his own personal feuds. But his career as a rebel general – almost a brigand – before his rise to the presidency was filled with bloodthirsty deeds which were the common knowledge of all. And at that moment it was those early years, fraught with blood and cruelty, that rose up in his mind.

He spent a few more minutes meditating tortures and barbarities as he walked up and down the room, then all at once he stopped and burst into a roar of laughter. Anyone who had seen him would certainly have taken him for a madman; but Tereso had hit upon a mode of revenge that

satisfied him. He would not hurt a hair of Fausta's head, he said to himself; but all her property and all her brother's property – the fruit of robberies old and new – should be confiscated. And, under pain of death, he would force her to marry Doroteo – her beloved Doroteo, Doroteo the illiterate caddie. He himself would be one of the sponsors of this splendid marriage; he and the Duchess, that excellent Duchess who had plotted and planned so busily to bring him and Fausta together. The wedding should take place that very night, in the chapel at the end of the gallery. Fausta was a widow, and the successor of the late lamented Count Sanchez should be – Doroteo the caddie. Afterwards he would send the happy couple for their honeymoon to the islands of Los Ladrones, the penal settlement, which were afflicted with a tropical climate and infested with mosquitoes; and there he would leave them, the dear young pair, to rot for a few years.

Tereso was delighted with this plan, for with the years there had come to him a certain contempt for violence – which is always stupid and in the end not very efficacious. It was a cruel but intelligent plan, a good joke in fact. He was especially delighted with his idea that the wedding should take place instantly, that very night, in the chapel of the villa. But it must not take place without anyone knowing of it, thought Tereso. A secret marriage would be altogether too convenient from Fausta's point of view. Everybody must know both of her infamous conduct and of her downfall, and he would send round to inform all the guests at the villa so that they might come, just as they were in their fancy dresses, to the ceremony. Without any further delay he called his secretary and gave him his strange orders. He told him to go at once and summon the chaplain of the villa (if he were asleep he must wake him) and tell him to get ready to celebrate a wedding; at the same time he was to send someone to find and arrest a young, red-haired caddie at the golf course by name Doroteo, who was to be brought along under escort. Finally he was to go round all the rooms in the villa and inform the guests that they were to be present at a wedding before dinner. At this last order

the secretary opened his eyes wide in astonishment and asked how this was to be done: since there were more than a hundred guests how could he possibly inform them all? But Tereso replied peremptorily that he must find a way somehow. For example, he could make use of the large number of police agents already in the house. In any case, he must act quickly and do everything as he had been ordered. The secretary, completely bewildered, clicked his heels and went out.

*

The discovery of Fausta's crowning infidelity and – perhaps even more – the neat perfection of his plan of revenge had killed all desire in Tereso. It was therefore without the slightest agitation that a little later he heard a knock at the communicating door. The dinner-table, shining with crystal and silver, had been placed between the bed and a sofa. Tereso sat down on the sofa, crossed his legs, and called to Fausta to come in. But the door did not open wide; at first it was merely unlatched and a small sooty hand was laid upon the white-and-gold paint of the doorpost. Then a brush became visible, its worn straw bristles also soot-stained; then an iron pail; and finally Fausta herself in her sweep's costume. She was wearing a light vest and a pair of patched, tattered trousers, and on her feet were a huge pair of men's shoes, all broken and falling to pieces. Both vest and trousers were dark and dirty with soot, but one or two cunningly-arranged holes allowed a glimpse of the pale curve of her breast and of her well-turned calf. Fausta's round face was plastered over with smudges and finger-marks of lamp-black, and her short hair, under a peaked cap, was arranged with careful untidiness. She looked absurdly small in her disguise – just like a boy – thought Tereso wistfully. The pail, filled with rags, hung on her arm, and under her arm, like an umbrella, she carried the brush. Shutting the door behind her she came forward, trailing her feet in her enormous shoes with the lazy, thoughtless air of a chimney-sweep, the peak of her cap pulled down over her eyes which were sparkling with mischievous gaiety,

and her mouth pursed as though she were whistling softly.

'I'm a poor little chimney-sweep,' she said in a sing-song voice as she wandered round the room without looking at Tereso. 'A poor little chimney-sweep out of a job. I was told there was a chimney here full of soot, overflowing with it. . . . Do I disturb you? I see you are expecting someone to dinner. If I am disturbing you, please say so at once and I will go away.'

Tereso, though he now looked at Fausta with quite other eyes than those of a lover, still could not help thinking her extraordinarily charming dressed up thus like an urchin, with those holes in her clothes through which one caught glimpses of her lovely body. But he now felt quite sure of himself and of his decision to take revenge, and more remorseless than he had ever been, even on the eve of those battles of which the issue was most secure. So he answered quite calmly that the chimney-sweep did not disturb him at all; moreover, if he would like it he could offer him a glass of sherry before he set to work. In a ceremonious manner he rose and filled two glasses. He wanted to play with Fausta a little as she had played with him. But Fausta, who had already grown tired of acting her part, suddenly declared in her natural voice that she could endure the dirt on her face no longer and would go and wash it off in the bathroom. So saying, and before Tereso had time to open his mouth, she put down her pail and brush on the floor and went out.

Tereso's room, as has already been explained, did not communicate directly with the bathroom. Between his room and the bathroom there was a vestibule through which was the way out into the gallery. Now, almost exactly at the moment when Fausta had gone into Tereso's room, Perro had handed over to Saverio the tray holding the imitation bomb hidden by a dish-cover. Saverio, after shaking the hand of the police spy with the deepest emotion, took the tray, went straight to Tereso's door and entered it without knocking. He found himself in the vestibule, which had three doors, the middle one leading to the General's room – from which at that moment came the sound of voices – the

one on the left leading to the bathroom, and the one on the right into the study. Saverio went into the bathroom.

He acted with a precision and calmness which were a direct result of his absolute faith in the goodness of his cause and of his consequent readiness to die for it if that should prove necessary. He turned on the light, closed the door, and put down the tray on a painted stool near the bath. Then he went to the little towel-cupboard, opened it, returned to the stool, lifted the dish-cover and taking out the bomb placed it in the cupboard between two piles of folded linen. It was at that moment that the door opened and Fausta came in.

Saverio had not yet shut the door of the cupboard, in which the black box containing the bomb showed conspicuously amongst the white towels; and it was this fact which sealed Fausta's fate. If the cupboard door had been closed Saverio might perhaps have had enough presence of mind to pass himself off as a real footman and find some excuse for being there. But with the cupboard door wide open and the black object in full view amongst the white linen, it did not seem to Saverio that he could take any risks. In any case he had lost his head the moment Fausta appeared. Before he himself realized what he was doing he had leapt at her, clapped his hand over her mouth and dragged her inside the bathroom, shutting the door again. Then, during the brief moment of their struggle between the narrow walls of the little room, he wondered what he ought to do – according to the rules of revolutionary procedure, of course. It seemed to him that there could be no doubt. Fausta must be liquidated. It was a question of murder; but Saverio knew that for the sake of the cause one could – or rather, if necessary, one should – commit murder; and that was enough for him. So he took away the hand which he had placed over Fausta's mouth to prevent her screaming and with both hands seized her by the throat, squeezing with all his might. She had just time to utter one brief cry which was immediately strangled, and to wave her two hands in the air with a gesture by which she attempted to offer Saverio, in exchange for her life, the big solitaire dia-

mond that sparkled on her sooty forefinger; then her strength gave out. Saverio knew she was dead because all of a sudden, as he was still frantically squeezing her throat, he almost fell forward, dragged down by the weight of the lifeless body as it collapsed.

Having killed Fausta, Saverio saw that in trying to avoid one danger he had fallen into another. Fausta alive would have denounced him; but Fausta dead would by her absence arouse the suspicions of the General, who would certainly come or send someone to look for her; and that would be the end of the plot. Not knowing what to do, Saverio had the idea of putting Fausta's body in the bath and turning on the taps. The sound of running water, he thought, would make the General think that Fausta was having a bath and so would delay the discovery of the crime. To carry out this fanciful plan Saverio immediately lifted the body, with a great effort, from the floor, slid it into the bath and turned on both taps. The bottom of the bath at once began to fill with a rush of water which swelled out the trousers and vest of the dead woman, who was resting almost in a sitting position, with her head and shoulders over the edge of the bath. At this point Saverio, who had so far acted simply as a conspirator, for the first time did something which was essentially the act of a murderer. Fausta's head was dangling backward, the hair ruffled, the tongue between the lips, the eyes blank and turned up – a horrible sight. Saverio, in a kind of panic, took a towel from the wash-basin and wrapped it right round the dead woman's head. He was just going to close the cupboard when there was a crash as the door was forced open, and Tereso appeared on the threshold.

The bathroom, which was next to the bedroom, was separated from it only by a rather thin wall, so that the one short cry uttered by Fausta before she died had been heard by Tereso. For a moment he was struck dumb; then, remembering the plot, he seized his revolver and rushed to the bathroom. The door was locked on the inside. But Tereso, taking a step back and then hurling himself against it with his shoulder, easily broke the little chain with which

Saverio imagined he had secured it. One glance was enough for Tereso, as he stood in the doorway, to understand what had happened – Fausta lying back over the edge of the bath in the foaming water, her head a bundle of white, Saverio turning towards him, on the point of rushing at him. Tereso took a step backwards into the vestibule and waited till Saverio's onrush should bring him as far as the door. Then he fired, aiming carefully at his chest. Saverio, who had now realized who Tereso was, and who, in a last attempt to save the tottering edifice of the conspiracy, was intending to throw himself on the General, disarm him and then kill him, bent down to seize his hand and received the bullet in the arm. He lurched forward, but, instead of falling against the door that led to the gallery, crashed right into Perro, who just at that moment was coming in to arrest him, followed by several police officers and Cinco himself.

'There must be a bomb in the little room,' said Cinco breathlessly, while two of the men dragged Saverio away. 'But you, Excellency, you are still alive – thank God. . . . Your Excellency, please go back into your own room as though nothing had happened and leave things to us. . . . Arrest that man,' he added, turning to Perro, 'and the rest of you search the bathroom – but don't make a noise. No one must notice anything.'

Cinco, in evening dress, revolver in hand, spoke in an excited but subdued voice which was meant to convince Tereso of the timeliness of his interference. He was still anxious to do everything in a discreet and refined manner, as he had promised his superior. But the General's demeanour, and still more the look in his eyes, suddenly paralysed him. Raising his hand to stop the two policemen as they were rushing into the bathroom to carry out Cinco's orders, Tereso himself entered first, went to the bath and, with his one hand, bit by bit without hurrying, unwrapped the cloth which enfolded Fausta's head.

'She is dead,' he said coldly, looking at the Chief of Police. 'My congratulations, Cinco. . . . You two – carry her out of here and lay her on my bed.'

In the meantime Perro, in a final attempt to justify the

calamity, went to the cupboard, took out the bomb and showed it to his chief, intending that Tereso also should see it, and saying: 'Here it is.' But Tereso did not deign even to glance at this demonstration of police efficiency. The two men had now lifted Fausta out of the bath and were carrying her, dripping, into the bedroom. Tereso, turning his back on Cinco and his acolyte, went out.

22

After Fausta's body had been laid on the bed the room soon filled with people – a couple of footmen and a maid attracted by the noise of the shooting; a number of plain-clothes policemen, among them the two who had carried in the body; Cinco and Perro, who, terrified by Tereso's silence, kept near the door; and finally the Duchess herself. She had waited a little for Sebastiano's return. Then, thinking that one of her guests must have called him, she had dressed herself up in her *vivandière* costume as he had advised. She was putting on her make-up when she heard the commotion, and ran out with only one cheek rouged. Bewildered, uncomprehending, in her red frogged *vivandière* jacket with a little bright-coloured wooden cask at her side and a big plumed hat on her head, she went from one person to another asking what had happened. But no one took any notice of her; they were all frightened, not only by the dead body lying on the bed, but even more by the presence of Tereso, erect and motionless in the window at the far end of the room.

Tereso was furious, with a bitter, empty fury that hurt him more than any direct pain. Fausta was dead and her death seemed, in some degree, an act of justice. But there had been a flaw – nay, worse, a definite, irreparable break – in the supreme, orderly, uncompromising rhythm of his day as a statesman. It was this that infuriated him. This corpse, this commotion, this invasion of his room seemed to him so many assaults upon his dignity and authority. Not

even death, not even the danger to which he had been exposed, could justify this irritating, ridiculous pandemonium. Tereso felt that mere dismissal would be too light a punishment for Cinco, with whom rested the prime responsibility for all the confusion.

At last Cinco and Perro, frightened by the General's ominous silence, left the room, followed by the police officers. But in the door of the vestibule they passed some other people who were arriving in ignorance of what had happened. First came Tereso's secretary, in a state of exhaustion, on his way to report the execution of the General's orders, and he was followed by a police officer holding an untidy and bewildered Doroteo tightly by the arm.

At first the secretary noticed no one except Tereso standing erect in the window. He clicked his heels as he entered and saluted stiffly, and then announced that all the General's orders had been carried out. The boy Doroteo was here; the priest had been notified, also the guests. . . . But suddenly he caught sight of the corpse lying on the bed, and he was silent.

Then at last Tereso spoke. The jest had been turned into tragedy, but there was no reason why the secretary should know it. Besides, Tereso was grateful to him for his arrival. Here at least was someone who carried out his orders faithfully, when everyone else, from Cinco to Fausta herself – whose death seemed to him, in his rage, to be a final and extreme act of disobedience – appeared to be in league to evade his wishes. Tereso decided to turn the wedding into a funeral; it would at least be an occasion for ceremony, and after so much confusion he felt a great need for some sort of formality, even that of a funeral. Speaking slowly, he answered the secretary that he had done very well, and told him that he must now go and inform the priest that it was not a wedding but a funeral at which he was to officiate. He was then to come back bringing some of the footmen to carry the body into the chapel. The secretary said he would do so and went out. Tereso, still standing in the window, stared at the door with a fixed, stern look which all the people present quickly interpreted as a command. One by

one they retreated, noiselessly, to the door. Tereso was left alone.

When the door had finally closed on the last of the intruders Tereso, freed from all startling, unseemly disturbance, felt that he could breathe again. This was his own room, his own bed, his own desk with its papers, his own table laid for dinner. Had it not been for the dead woman lying on the coverlet he might even have imagined that nothing had happened, so quiet and intimate was the light shed over the room by the two candelabra on the table. And, in the silence that followed the recent disturbance, he was relieved to notice the serene, concentrated quality that he always liked. Refreshed by this quietness, his fury at last left him. He slowly approached the bed and, after a moment's hesitation, sat down on the edge.

Then, as he looked at Fausta's lifeless body, he found – now that his longing for order and ceremonial had been appeased – that the bitterness of her death rose up again in his mind more sharply than ever. It was upon that very bed that he had hoped to embrace this woman; but Fate had willed that she should lie upon it only in death. Fausta, who had tricked him so many times, had now eluded him for ever. Tereso, at this thought, experienced once again that sense of impotence which vain strivings after love had so often awakened in him. But now it was mingled with a new kind of rage that rebelled against this macabre form of frustration, against the finality of this irremediable loneliness.

Tereso had lowered his eyes in the effort to thrust back within himself the emotion that stunned him; now he raised them and looked at Fausta. She was lying stretched out on the bed, but in their haste the police officers had not troubled to put her down so that her head lay upon the pillow. It was resting flat on the coverlet and was turned slightly towards her shoulder, showing her face in profile, in a light that was softened by the shadow of the curtains. Her body lay peacefully at full length and there was no outward sign of death except that the mouth had remained half open, like the beak of some little dead bird that looks as though it had

lived on air. Her short, ruffled hair fell over her cheeks and little pointed curls stood out all round her head. But, though the serene expression of her face seemed to belie death, death was clearly visible in the folds of the soaked vest and trousers. These folds had fallen in lines quite different from those of the recumbent body; wrinkled, clinging to the breast, the belly, the legs, the form which they had taken seemed to suggest that they had been produced by some living impulse – the impulse of a life which, in those limbs, no longer existed. Tereso had seen innumerable dead bodies, in every attitude, in his fighting days, and he tried to remain, as then, indifferent. But this final disillusionment, sterile and apathetic in itself, and affecting as it did both passion and power, forced him against his will to continue in a kind of inert, miserable contemplation.

And so, it seemed, there was nothing to be done but to give in and admit defeat and, at best, try to adjust this mysterious, lamentable disorder to some kind of human order. Tereso rose, walked round the bed, and with the thumb of his one hand closed the lids over the dead woman's eyes. Then, without haste and in an almost casual, negligent manner, he lifted the heavy, lifeless arms one after the other by the wrists and placed them together on the breast, crossing the hands. A small ebony and ivory crucifix hung on the wall above the bed. He took it down and put it between the hands.

At this moment there was a discreet knock at the door. Tereso stepped quickly back from the bed, went to the wardrobe, took down his belt and fastened it round his waist, and then called: 'Come in.' It was the secretary, with four footmen who were carrying, by the bars of its bright metal frame, a kind of camp-bed. During the summer Fausta had often lain on this camp-bed, naked in the sun, to acquire that tan that suited her complexion so well. The four men placed her body on it and spread over it the coverlet from the bed.

*

The secretary had not had time to cancel the wedding invitations that his emissaries had delivered to each room in the villa. As the four men came out of Tereso's room carrying the camp-bed they found a crowd gathered at the end of the gallery on the opposite side to the chapel. Four or five police officers with hands linked formed a barrier across this part of the gallery, and behind them the people in the crowd stretched their necks and poked their heads forward to see what was happening. All the guests were in their fancy dresses, and in the dusk of the dimly-lit gallery could be seen an assemblage of painted faces, brightly-coloured costumes, gay silks and feathers. It was not too dark to distinguish, here an enormous cardboard nose, scarlet and warty, there a gigantic Punch's head, here a yellow-faced Chinaman, there a monstrous red and white mask with features fixed in a drunken laugh. When they saw the four men appear carrying the body all the guests could do was to take off their hats – those that were wearing them; others took off their false noses, their masks, their tow beards. And so the four footmen carried the dead woman to the chapel under the curious eyes of the masquerading crowd. The Duchess, in tears, her little cask swinging at her side, for once unable to maintain her air of haughtiness, followed behind with the secretary, melancholy, bespectacled, very tall and thin. Then came the police officer and Doroteo. And, last of all, Tereso, very upright and stiff in his neat, tight uniform, his thumb thrust into his belt. The little procession slowly, hesitatingly, traversed the whole length of the gallery, beneath the saturnine gaze of the Spanish Conquistadors. Beyond the barrier formed by the police officers the grotesque crowd stretched their necks for a last look. Then the chapel door closed behind Tereso.

The chapel was small but high-ceilinged. A black-and-gilt balcony with a curving balustrade ran round the white-washed walls; and along the walls, close to each other in a line, were the baroque tombs of the Duchess Gorina's ancestors. Tortuous coats-of-arms, skulls of glossy yellow marble, tablets with ornamental bronze inscriptions, plump cherubs – nothing was missing of the funereal trappings of former

times. The altar at the far end was a blaze of golden swords. Above it was a big, dark picture, without a frame, of a livid Christ crowned with great blood-dripping thorns, the feet transfixed by a rough nail and entwined in the coils of a black serpent.

The priest, a big man laden with rich vestments, was standing before the altar. He had felt no great surprise at receiving an order first to celebrate a wedding and secondly to change the wedding into a funeral. Baptisms, weddings, funerals: after the many years he had been performing his functions, he had long ceased to see any essential difference between these very different ceremonies. Not that he was a sceptic; but human life, reduced to these three events, had become too wretched and insignificant for him still to be able, after so long, make any emotional distinctions between them. In the present case, it was true, there was the strangeness of the hour and of the sudden alteration, and the unusual element of a violent death. But the authority of Tereso was enough to counterbalance these oddities.

When he saw the little funeral procession enter the chapel the priest raised his arm and, without betraying the slightest curiosity in his plump, doleful face, told them in a low, distinct voice to come forward and put down the bier at the foot of the altar. Then, turning to his acolyte, he whispered to him to be quick and find the Office for the Dead in the Missal. The organist, however, who in the confusion had been told nothing, was unable to see from his closed box that there had been an alteration in the ceremony; and so, as the four men carefully put down their burden before the altar, the silence was suddenly broken by the triumphant, exultant music of a wedding march. The priest could not refrain from a gesture of annoyance and made a sign to the acolyte, who was then seen to run down the aisle as fast as his red and white cassock would permit, and disappear into the covered staircase leading to the organ. Abruptly, on its most joyful note, the music stopped.

The priest, after looking about for a moment as though to see that nothing was missing, turned his back on the chapel, walked to the Missal and began to intone the prayers. The

acolyte crossed himself and knelt on the lowest step of the altar. The sonorous, hurried voice of the priest was suddenly drowned by the organ playing the opening phrases of the *Requiem*.

The Duchess had seated herself on the bench nearest the altar on the left, Tereso on the corresponding bench on the right. The Duchess was thinking chiefly of her party and of her social position, both of them now sadly prejudiced. At the same time she could not help wondering, almost in spite of herself, what had become of Sebastiano. But she crossed herself very devoutly and at once began to move her lips in prayer. The little wine-cask was still dangling at her side, but she had exchanged her plumed hat, which she had left in Tereso's room, for a handkerchief.

Tereso, too, was kneeling, his forehead pressed against his hand. In his own way, and in a very formal manner, Tereso was a religious man. With a feeling of humility, both bitter and touching to him on account of his own high position, he was thinking as he prayed, not of the murdered Fausta, but of himself and of death. He had been, till that moment, a disappointed lover. As he knelt before the Crucifix he felt himself a statesman again; to him it seemed that he was not only rediscovering the dignity of his own power but also a sense of his own nullity before God.

Doroteo, standing at one side of the door, understood nothing of what had happened, not even that Fausta was dead. On the opposite side stood the police officer who had arrested him and whose only thought now was to keep him under strict observation in the hope that the General would notice his zeal. The secretary, kneeling at a bench in the background, speculated vainly, as he bowed his bald head, upon the cause of this mysterious affair, of this wedding turned at the last minute into a funeral.

At the same moment, at the far end of the park, on a seat in the shade of a magnolia, Giustina, after much artifice and coquettishness, had just taken off her mask, and Sebastiano was making the mortifying, hateful discovery that he had once again been deceived. Fausta was now lost to him finally and for ever – and by a contemptible trick in which there

was nothing lacking, not even the moon rising behind the woods, to make it appear a parody of his former rapturous nights.

At the same moment also Saverio, in the agony of death, with three mortal wounds in different parts of his body, was being jolted up and down in a car carrying him at full speed along the Antigua road for burial in the cemetery there. It was Cinco's favourite method of getting rid of embarrassing prisoners – the so-called *leyfuga*, or 'escape law': the prisoner was killed, and it was then given out that he had tried to escape. Cinco, being now certain of dismissal, was no longer interested in staging the grand trial that he had formerly planned. But the man who had given Saverio the death-blow, by shooting him in the back of the neck, had been Perro.